

MID-DECEMBER 1993

# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION

S.P. Somtow  
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# Asimov's

## SCIENCE FICTION

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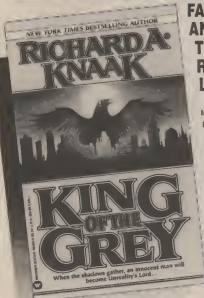
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# LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I have just read your March issue, and have to comment on how much I appreciated some of the stories. "Death on the Nile," by Connie Willis, and "Driving the Chevy Biscayne to Oblivion," by Kandis Elliot, were especially good. Thank you for presenting the style of fiction that women like to read, and for giving an equal chance to women writers.

Sincerely,

Lena Crittenden  
Merritt Island, FL

Dear Asimov's,

It is past midnight as I start this, and I have just finished reading *Forward the Foundation*. It took longer than I'd anticipated, perhaps due to a reluctance to put down Isaac's last story. I've enjoyed so many—dating back to seventh grade when a school librarian, trying to wean me from comic books, suggested that I might like *Pebble in the Sky*. . . .

I just re-read (after nearly forty years) the opening of *Foundation* and am awed at how flawlessly *Forward* segues into it. I don't know why Isaac decided to link up all his *Foundation* and *Robot* stories as he did—from his published comments when asked, apparently he didn't know—but it was a mas-

terful and awe-encompassing accomplishment.

Just as *Foundation* was made up of shorter pieces from *Astounding*, *Forward* goes back to that tradition except the pieces were now in Asimov's—except for the fourth part and the epilogue. Will you do those as well, or is it too late now that the full book is out? It would be nice to at least run the epilogue on some fitting occasion, paralleling as Hari Seldon did some of Isaac's own life (although I could also see parts of him in Yugo Amaryl and others, even Daneel).

It has been years since I've been so affected by a book, but of course it's partly because of what Isaac has meant in my life over the years, with his gift of seeming to be writing a personal letter at times to each reader. I guess it's time to re-read the *Foundation* and *Robot* books, this time in their own order rather than when they were published. *Forward* may be very much a book of goodbyes by Isaac to others, but with the body of work he has left us, we won't be saying goodbye to him for a long time.

Paul Dellinger  
Wytheville, VA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I especially enjoyed Nancy Kress' novella "Dancing on Air,"

published in the last issue of *Asimov's*. One thing about the story bothered me, however, and although this may seem a little picaresque, I thought it worth bringing to your attention.

At p. 141, the second narrator says "I even picked up hints of experimental work on altering genetic makeup *in vitro*, instead of trying to reshape adult bodies." In context (i.e., in the context of the entire story), this seems to indicate that the author means "*in vitro*" to denote experimentation within a living embryo. This form of experimentation, abhorrent to the narrator, forms a large part of her motivation in the climactic "shooting" scene.

However, I have never understood "*in vitro*" to denote (or connote) anything other than "outside of a living organism" (or, literally, "within glass"). Thus, as a reader, I had to stumble through the paragraphs surrounding that initial use of the term, unsure if I knew what the author was trying to say. I trust she meant to say "*in utero*." (I suppose, in the author's defense, that "*in vitro*" could be used as some sort of sly reference to test-tube embryos, but that would have necessitated, I think, some explanation to us late twentieth century readers.)

At any rate, I think this is the sort of error a careful reading would have caught and corrected. Further, since I believe it is the obligation of a prose writer to say, as closely as is possible, exactly what she means (especially when a scientific phrase is used in a quasi-scientific publication), that errors of this sort should not happen. Why

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use a fancy Latin term if you're unsure of its meaning? (My apologies to Ms. Kress if this was a typist's error, and not her own).

I don't mean to sound hyper-critical, however. "Dancing" is otherwise a very enjoyable story. Also, as an occasional rather than religious reader of your magazine, I find it interesting to note that certain unusual themes occur more than once. There was, I believe, a story in your magazine (or perhaps it was *Analog*) not too long ago about another dog altered with "nano-machines" (it kept getting hit by cars). It might be interesting (and not too difficult) to trace an idea like this one to its origins (i.e., the first published discussion of "nano-machine" theory, through its use in dogs, etc.)—showing a sort of "family tree" of a plot/character device.

Christopher R. Doyle  
Washington, DC

Dear Gardner:

Norman Spinrad is one of the most erudite and insightful critics the SF genre has, and I applaud his review column in the July issue. Nevertheless, I must point out a minor error of accuracy. On page 166, while discussing Robert Charles Wilson's engaging novel *The Harvest*, he erroneously attributes *The Day of the Triffids* to a John Christopher. I'm sure he meant John Wyndham, the pseudonym of the late, brilliant British author John Benyon Harris. As I said, a minor and forgivable lapse in an otherwise instructive piece.

David A. Truesdale  
Independence, MO

Dear Sheila & Gardner:

Hi! Thanks so much for the award certificate and check. I'd like to personally thank the readers, so consider the following paragraph for publication.

Thank you *Asimov's SF* readers for voting me Best Cover Artist. It's quite an honor and demonstrates how much the SF audience (all of you) view the cover art of all SF magazines and books as something more than just packaging or pretty pictures! That's what makes such a difference being in SF! Once again—thank you most sincerely.

I figured that had I been in New Orleans, I would've made a speech of sorts but the WHOLE readership would not have been there.

Again, thanks—

Bob Eggleton  
Providence, RI

Dear Gardner:

*Asimov's* is looking great these days. I'm really enjoying all those stories from my two favorite new writers, Maureen F. McHugh and Mary Rosenblum. Another favorite: Diane Mapes. And of course, Nancy Kress, whose story "Martin On a Wednesday" came right out of my notebook of ideas. I've never met her . . . does that mean there really is a common muse out there that we all tap into now and again? Or is the idea of inducing split personalities in people to cure them of illness an obvious thought?

At any rate, she beat me to it, and with a wonderful story to boot. I congratulate her, and you for publishing it.

Wendy Rathbone  
Yucca Valley, CA



# Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

## CONGRATULATES THE WINNERS OF THE 1992 HUGO AWARDS AND CHESLEY AWARDS

Best Novel (tie)

***A Fire Upon the Deep***  
by Vernor Vinge  
***Doomsday Book***  
by Connie Willis

Best Novelette

**"The Nutcracker Coup"**  
by Janet Kagan  
(*Asimov's*, December 1992)

Best Non-Fiction Book

***A Wealth of Fable:  
An Informal History of  
Science Fiction Fandom  
in the 1950's***  
by Harry Warner, Jr.

Best Professional Artist

**Don Maltz**

Best Fanzine

***Mimosa***

Best Fan Writer

**Dave Langford**

Best Fan Artist

**Peggy Ranson**

Best Magazine

Cover (Chesley)

**Michael Whelan for  
*Asimov's* November 1992**

Best Novella

**"Barnacle Bill the Spacer"**  
by Lucius Shepard  
(*Asimov's*, July 1992)

Best Short Story

**"Even the Queen"**  
by Connie Willis  
(*Asimov's*, April 1992)

John W. Campbell Award  
for Best New Writer

**Laura Resnick**

Best Professional Editor

**Gardner Dozois**

Best Dramatic Presentation

**"The Inner Light"**  
(*Star Trek: The  
Next Generation*)

Best Semiprozine

***Science Fiction Chronicle***

Best Original Artwork

***Dinotopia***  
by James Gurney

Best Interior

Illustration (Chesley)  
**Alan M. Clark  
for "Poles Apart"**  
(*Analog*, Mid-December 1992)



# THE CURE FOR LOVE

Brian Stableford

The British edition of Brian Stableford's latest novel, *Carnival of Destruction*, will be out from Simon & Schuster early in 1994. Corroll & Grof will publish the American edition later in the year. At present, Mr. Stableford is translating Jean Lorroin's classic Decadent novel, *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901), into English for Dedalus. The translation will be credited to Francis Amery—the pseudonym he uses for work of that kind.

art: Ran Chiranna



It was the expression on the man's face that caught her gaze and made her stop to take a longer look at him. He was standing on the pavement which skirted the open space in front of the King's Manor, staring at Bootham Bar and the Theatre Royal in the bemused manner of one struggling to reconcile old memories with changed appearances, mesmerized by the combination of the new and the half-familiar. It was only because she guessed *what* he was—a native of the town who had been away for a *long* time—that she was able to take the further step of realizing *who* he was.

He was Don Sherrington, and she had been at school with him for five years, before she left to have the baby. She had last seen him three years after that, before he and Di left the city for good.

She walked toward him, but before she spoke she hesitated, wondering if, after all, she might be mistaken—and wondering, too, whether there was any point in saying anything to him even if she were not. Had it happened six months before, she might have smiled to herself and walked on, but she was more vulnerable to impulse nowadays, and she stopped, then moved to stand beside him and said: "Excuse me, but aren't you Don Sherrington?"

He turned his pale blue eyes on her, without any particular expression on his face. She saw him squint slightly through his spectacles as he brought her face into focus and tried to place it. It would have been nice if he had recognized her at once, but he couldn't.

"I'm Catherine Tyldesley—Catherine Grant when you first knew me."

For a second or two he was still struggling, but then the memory clicked into place and he blinked. "Carrie!" he said, smiling faintly at the stale old joke, its comicality renewed by a combination of long disuse and nostalgia.

"That's right," she said. "Carrie. It must be twelve or fourteen years since . . ."

"It must have been 1991," he said. "The summer of 1991."

How typical of him, she thought, to be able to remember the date as soon as the name clicked. He always had a memory like a computer. But then she realized that it must be easy enough for him to remember the year when he left to go south on the big adventure. He probably didn't remember the last time he had seen her at all.

"We were at school together until '88," she told him, to demonstrate that she too had a head for dates, even though she was only subtracting 3 from 1991. "You stayed on when I left. You and Di."

"Yes," he said. "You had to get married." As he said it he must have realized how it sounded, because he suddenly blushed and looked uncomfortable. The blush brought on a sudden fit of nostalgia, because she remembered that they had both blushed that same way—he and Di

—when they were kids. Their complexions were so pale that their blushes always stood out like traffic lights.

"It's all right," she said, quickly. "It's true. Pregnant at fifteen, married at sixteen, divorced at twenty-three, dead on my feet at thirty-one. I bet your life's been much more interesting. I read something about you in the paper, you know—must have been about five or six years ago. Said you were in . . . I'm not sure—something to do with viruses."

"Virus engineering," he said.

"What brings you back here?" she asked.

"I'm running away," he said, so soberly that for a moment she had the bizarre idea that he was on the run from the police. But then he pinked again and flashed her a half-embarrassed smile, and she knew that he only meant that he had come back up north to get away from London for a while. A sentimental journey, no doubt. But then the smile died and the sobriety came back, and she realized that the carelessness of his earlier remark had been born of a genuine preoccupation. His smiles were more than slightly forced. He was distracted; maybe he had come away to give himself a chance to think.

She took her courage in both hands, surprised to discover how much courage she actually needed in order to ask, and said: "I can give you somewhere to hide for a while, if you like. My flat's only ten minutes away, out toward the football ground. It'd be nice to talk about old times."

His embarrassment was suddenly increased again, and he looked down at the bag which he was carrying in his right hand. It was one of those many-zipped contraptions carefully designed to the maximum dimensions which airlines allowed as hand-baggage, and it seemed to be full.

"I'm not sure I have time," he said. "I haven't found a hotel yet . . . I just wanted to walk around a bit while the sun's still shining."

"It's only four o'clock," she said, defensively. Her heart sank at the thought of her invitation being turned down, after she'd risked so much in asking. "The tourist season never really ends these days, but it is November—you won't have any trouble getting a room. Just a cup of coffee."

She saw his eyes change again as he caught on to the fact that she wasn't just being polite—that she actually wanted him to come.

"All right," he said. "That's very kind."

She turned away, and he fell into step with her.

"How's Di?" she asked, when it became clear that he couldn't find anything to say. "Do you see much of her these days?"

"She's dead," he said, so simply and so brutally that she was stabbed by shock. She felt tears well up in her eyes, though she knew how silly that was, given that she hadn't seen Di Sherrington in thirteen years,

and hadn't been particularly friendly even when they were girls together at school.

"Oh!" she said, when she had taken control of herself. "I'm sorry, Don . . . I didn't know. What . . . when . . .?"

"Five years ago," he said, dully. She expected him to elaborate, but he didn't. Suddenly, the cup of coffee and the cozy chat about old times didn't seem like such a good idea. If Di was dead, how could they possibly laugh together about the times they'd had at school? Whatever they remembered, Di would be center-stage. Di had always been center-stage.

In fact, Carrie realized that she couldn't remember Don apart from Di at all. He had always been in her shadow. Everyone had always thought of Di as Don's "big sister," though of course they were twins. Di had only been an inch or so taller but she had been much more full of life, much more self-confident, much more grown-up. Girls matured so much faster than boys that a teenage girl was always likely to outgrow a twin brother, but there had been more to it than that. Di had been much more lively than Don, much more sociable, much more popular. Everybody had loved Di.

Carrie remembered that she had been a little bit stuck on Don at one time—when they were twelve, or maybe thirteen—because he was so frail and serious and *pretty*. But when she'd got a little bit older she'd started to look for more masculine and masterful traits in her boyfriends, and had come to think of prettiness as an unfortunate attribute in a boy, suggestive of wimpishness or queerness. God, what a fool she had been! If only she had had the sense to stick with the wimps! But it wouldn't have done her any good to stay stuck on Don Sherrington, she knew. He had been too shy to be lured out of his shell; too nervous and inarticulate—in spite of his unusual cleverness—ever to get into a relationship with anyone who didn't happen to have been born his twin.

But Di was dead! Dead at twenty-six!

Carrie didn't have the nerve to probe for more details. If he was going to tell her what had happened, he would have to tell her in his own time and in his own way. But she couldn't think of any other way of re-opening the conversation. How could she switch from the news that Di was dead to some by-the-way inquiry about how the virus engineering was going, or how long he planned to stay, or whereabouts he was living down in the capital city? All she needed to make the disaster complete was for Don to take it into his head to ask about Malcolm—but mercifully, he didn't. He probably couldn't remember Malcolm's name, if he had ever heard it.

She was glad when they reached the flat, so that she could tell him to sit down and then hang up his coat for him and ask him how he took his

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coffee. By the time she had boiled the kettle and made the coffee and poured it into mugs she had decided how best to carry on.

"I've been living here for fifteen years," she told him. "Stuck in a time warp. My mother still lives two streets away. She's divorced too, now—got out just after me. Only time in my life I ever set anyone a good example."

"I don't remember your husband very well," said Don, warily.

"Gavin Tyldesley," she said. "He was two years ahead of us at the comp. You wouldn't have known him, unless you were one of the smaller boys he bullied."

Don winced slightly at that, and dropped his eyes to stare into his coffee cup. "I didn't get bullied much," he said. "They were all afraid of Di, I think. Even if they weren't scared that she'd hit them, they all wanted her to like them."

"I could have done with some protection myself," said Carrie, trying to sound flippant but not succeeding. "If I'd only kept an aspirin between my knees I wouldn't have needed so many later to stop my head ringing." She was surprised—not by her bitterness but by the fact that she felt free to let it out to someone she hadn't seen for so long, and hadn't really known that well. She could see that he was surprised too, but he was less embarrassed now. He was beginning to relax—but not because he felt at ease . . . more as if he were being claimed by some awful tiredness.

"He used to hit you?" he said, but not as though he thought the idea was unduly shocking or horrible.

"Only when he was drunk. He had fits of thinking that I'd ruined his life by tying him down when he was only eighteen. When he was sober he knew how useless he was, but when he was half-cut he began to get delusions of lost opportunity. Not that he thought he could have gone to university, of course, but he did think that he could have gone to London and *made it*."

"Made what?"

"I don't know. He never said. Become a yuppie, I guess—we had yuppies in those days, didn't we?"

"Yes," said Don, with a faraway look in his eye which suggested that he was remembering. "We certainly did. I guess I was one."

"No you weren't," she told him. "You got a degree, and went into something worthwhile. Yuppies were parasites, but virus engineers are conquering disease and making the world a better place. If they get rich, they deserve it."

"Maybe," he said, quietly. "Not that I *am* rich. And not everyone thinks virus engineers are so wonderful, even if we did manage to cure the common cold. Some people find the whole idea frightening."

"I may have left school early," she said, "but I'm not a moron. I've



been going to night classes for four years, and I've just started an Open University degree. I know that virus engineering isn't a matter of inventing new plagues, and that it goes a long way beyond trying to cure the plagues we already live with."

He blushed again. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really didn't mean . . ."

"No," she said, "of course you didn't. God, isn't this difficult? Here we are, both in our thirties, remembering each other as silly school kids. No wonder we're dying of embarrassment! But I liked you when we were little—I really did. I fancied you when I was twelve." She hadn't meant to say that, even though it was true enough, but it had slipped out as she tried to rescue the conversation from terminal awfulness, and now she had to worry about whether it had made things even worse.

His reaction to the revelation was odd. Instead of reddening again and looking down at the mug which he was cradling defensively in his hands he looked her straight in the eye, with an authority and confidence of which she had judged him incapable, and in a tone replete with honest puzzlement, he said: "Did you?"

It was her turn to blush. "Yes," she said. "Quite a few of us did, on the quiet. But you didn't notice us at all."

He continued looking at her for three seconds, then dropped his gaze. "I never knew that," he said. "I thought nobody liked me. I thought everybody liked Di."

"Everybody did," said Carrie. "But you were her twin brother. Why shouldn't they like you too?"

"We weren't identical twins," he said, matter-of-factly. "In fact, there were never two siblings less alike."

"That's not true," she told him. "Your faces were very similar, and you had the same blond hair. Maybe the look suited a girl rather better than a boy, and the specs didn't do you any favors, but . . ."

"That's not what I meant," he interrupted. "I meant *temperamentally*."

"Oh," said Carrie. "Well, maybe. But there's nothing wrong with being quiet and shy. . . ." She stopped when she saw the way he was looking at her. It was all bullshit, she knew. When kids were that age, there was a lot wrong with being quiet and shy. That was why she had grown out of her slightly sentimental attitude to Don Sherrington, and started wiggling her stupid fanny at the likes of Gavin Tyldesley, because he was older, and didn't give a damn about the teachers, and acted as though he could hand out a licking to the whole bloody world.

In fact, of course, the only thing Gavin could consistently hand out a licking to was her—and it had been quiet little Don Sherrington, always hiding behind his sister's skirts, who had really had it in him to get to grips with the world and play his part in changing the course of history. Carrie looked at him now, still pale and apparently ineffectual, and

wished that she had had the sense to love *him*, and let *him* get her up the stick.

She wondered, recklessly brazen in the privacy of her own thoughts, whether she could do it now. Could she keep him here all night, instead of letting him go forth in search of a hotel? Could she make up, even if it were just for one night, for nineteen years of folly? It had been a long time since she had let a man fuck her, and she hadn't missed it at all—but she missed, or thought she did if her memory wasn't playing tricks with her, the way she had felt about Don Sherrington when she had been twelve years old.

*That's sick!* she suddenly thought, disgusted with herself. *Jesus, have I done so little with my life that I can go gaga about a kid I once simpered at in the back row of Mrs. Hatton's class, before I even started having periods?*

But she couldn't drown the chain of thought in the acid of self-loathing, because the very next thought that came into her head was more shameful still. *At least, she thought, I've got him on his own. I don't have to compete with Di. She's dead and buried.*

That really pricked her conscience, and made her say, "I'm very sorry about Di. I really am. I hope I didn't hurt you by asking about her. It must have been terrible, with your being so close—although I suppose you drifted apart in time. Was she married? Are you?"

She had to close her mouth firmly to stop the babble and give him a chance to respond.

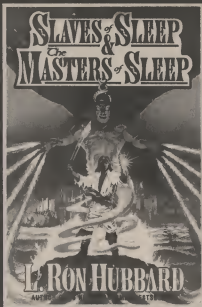
"No," he said calmly enough. "We hadn't drifted apart. We were still sharing a place when she died. Neither of us married. But you mustn't feel bad about asking. To save further blushes, I suppose I'd better say now that she died of AIDS. It was the mutated C-7 strain—we caught up with it soon after, of course, but not quickly enough to save her."

That stopped her train of dirty fantasies all right. She could see the tragedy in what he was saying only too clearly. He was a virus engineer, but his twin sister had been killed by a virus, just before the virus engineers had finally figured out how to stop it spreading. A real sickener.

So they had still been living under the same roof! She remembered the dirty jokes the kids had used to make about Don loving his sister and her loving him. Nasty jokes, born as often as not of fierce jealousy. All the boys had wanted to get into Di's knickers. Some of them had, too—but only some. Di had been no slag, although she had had an awkward habit of falling in love, too deeply and too often.

*Didn't we all?* Carrie thought, just before she began to wonder—because she couldn't help it—whether Don Sherrington might possibly

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have AIDS, and where he might have caught it from. She wished momentarily that she hadn't invited him back—not because he might have AIDS, but because his presence was making her think things she didn't much like herself for thinking.

"You're quite safe," he said, awkwardly, making her scream inwardly at the thought that he might have read her mind.

But he hadn't. "We're very careful at the labs," he went on. "We're in contact with nasty bugs all the time, but we take great care not to let them out. I know people get worried about what virus engineers might have caught at work, but . . . it's . . ." He trailed off, as though he had lost himself in mid-sentence.

"I'm not scared," she said, a fraction sharply.

He set his mug down suddenly. It still had an inch of coffee in it. "I shouldn't have come in," he said. "I'm sorry. It was thoughtless of me. I'd better go and find a . . ."

She cut him off before he spoke the final word. "Please," she said. "Don't go. I know I'm being stupid, but don't go. Of course I know you're not bringing any vile germs into my flat, and I really never meant to imply that you might be. I know it's embarrassing because I didn't know about Di, and asked about her in the wrong way, but I really would like you to stay for a while and talk to me because I'm lonely and because it really is nice to be reminded of a time before my life got into such a mess. I want you to stay, and I want us both to pull ourselves together and start being pleasant and civilized, and if you can't stand to stay I shall be very disappointed. Please."

She said it all quickly, not knowing whether it was sensible or stupid or whether it could possibly paper over the cracks or make things ten times worse. But she *did* want him to stay, for all the reasons she had cited as well as the unmentionable ones.

He hadn't managed to stand up yet, but he didn't look as if he intended to stay sitting down.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," he said. "I lied to you a few moments ago. You see, I really *shouldn't* have come into your home, because I *am* carrying a virus. You *are* safe, even though I've drunk out of your mug, because it would require prolonged intimate contact to infect you, and it's nothing anywhere near as bad as AIDS, but even so, I don't really have the right to come in here . . . or anywhere . . . without telling people. I don't even have the right to be running away . . . not really."

He stopped, just as she had, because he didn't know whether he had said far too much, and made things ten times worse.

She stared at him. She wasn't in the least scared. In fact, she was glad. She was glad because she thought there was a possibility that he might tell her the big secret whose existence he had just revealed to her. He,

Don Sherrington, might tell her, Carrie Tyldesley, a secret! If only it could be something really awful—something which would bind them together in a conspiracy of shared silence! If only. . . .

"I meant it," she said. "I really did like you a lot. I really wish I had told you. It would have been nice."

That threw him off balance, and made him hesitate. Good!

"No it wouldn't," he said, warily. "Twelve-year-old boys can't handle that kind of confession from twelve-year-old girls. I'd probably have been terribly rude to you, and I would have regretted it so much when I remembered it when you spoke to me out there in the square that . . ."

"But you can handle it *now*," she said. "And I want you to stay. Why should I care what kind of a virus you've got, if I can't catch it?"

She thought she had lost when he stood up, and said: "It's impossible. We don't even know one another. I'm sorry, but. . ." But then he sat down again, and finished the sentence with different words than those he'd started out to say. ". . . I'm being very rude, aren't I? And we do know one another, don't we? In fact, I probably know you at least as well as anyone I've met since I went away, even though we were never particular friends."

She knew then that he was going to tell her. Not right away, but eventually. She knew, too, that she was going to be able to hang on to him, at least for one night. He didn't really want to go to a hotel. Maybe he didn't really want to be anywhere, but now he *was* somewhere, would cling to it at least for a little while.

*He's going to tell me everything*, she thought, triumphantly. *Everything*.

And she was right.

"It's a long story," he warned her, when the time finally came. It was late; they had eaten dinner, and he had drunk enough wine to loosen his tongue, knowing full well that that was what it would do.

"I don't mind," she said, awarding herself full marks for understatement.

"It's all to do with Di."

"I guessed."

He nodded, slowly. "I didn't call her Di, you know—not in private. Our parents gave us the same initials—I suppose it's the kind of silly thing you do when you suddenly become the parents of twins. I was Donald James and she was Diana Josephine. To Mum, Dad, and the world, we were Don and Di, but as soon as we were old enough to think it was a neat idea we decided that to one another, we'd always be Jay and Jo. We could see that other people thought our relationship was special, and we

wanted it to be extra-special. I guess it's a natural hazard of being twins, even if you're non-identical.

"We were always very close—you probably thought we were close at school, but you didn't see what we were like at home. We were very different, though. She used to say that I was the brains and she was the brawn, but that we were just two halves of the same person. Jay and Jo; day and night; introvert and extrovert; yin and yang. Never alike at all, except in looks, but always tightly together. Unhealthy, I guess, in more ways than one—but it was unbreakable. However different were the things we did when we were apart, they never affected the way we were together.

"Maybe it would have changed if Mum and Dad hadn't been killed in the plane crash, but that drove us more closely together, and whatever possibility there might have been of Jo staying up north while I went to university in London vanished completely. We had enough when the estate was settled to buy a nice flat, and that's what we did. I studied, got my degree, went on to do research, joined the Institute. Di worked as a temp—here, there, everywhere.

"We didn't necessarily see one another, even in the evenings. Di went out a lot, had lots of boyfriends. When she was working a long way from home she often went out of the flat before I got up, and didn't come back until I was in bed asleep. Sometimes she didn't come home at all, and sometimes she brought her boyfriends back to her own bed. We weren't living in one another's pockets, but we were always, in some special sense, together. If she'd ever actually moved out . . . but it never came to that. She could never stay infatuated long enough to set up home with anyone else, in spite of the fact that she could become utterly and completely besotted with the men she took up with. Do you remember what she used to be like when she fell in love?"

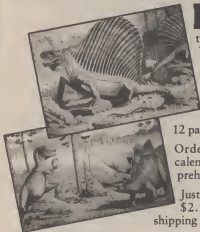
"Do I?" said Carrie. "We were all awful about it, but she was the worst. Really lovesick. Moony, hyperactive, anxious, ecstatic . . . the lot. Maybe she could have done as well as you did, if she'd ever been able to keep her mind on lessons instead of boys. Surely it was just a phase, though?"

"No," he said. "With Jo—Di, that is—it wasn't a phase. She joked about it, of course. She could see how ridiculous it was, and she'd have given it up if she only could. She got very embarrassed about it. 'The only good thing you can say about love,' she'd say, 'is that it doesn't last any longer than the common cold.' It was truer than she realized—because, you see, love really did hit Di with symptoms uncannily akin to some kind of virus attack. She would be literally feverish, always hyped up while she waited for the phone to ring, tearful if anything went wrong. And it really did hurt—quite literally. I didn't understand, for a long time, because I didn't see how it could. But it really was painful for her. Her

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infatuations disrupted her body chemistry in a big way. I guess it takes a lot of other people the same way, though not so extremely."

"It does," said Carrie, softly, remembering. She also remembered the other kind of hurt, which came along when love had turned to marriage and marriage to divorce, and babies into serpents' teeth. Bruises and anguish . . . bruises and anguish. Malcolm had disrupted her body chemistry far more than Gavin ever had—and they called that love, too, didn't they?

"But I was very different," said Don, reflectively. "I was very calm, very placid. Jo used to say that I was lucky, because I never fell in love at all, and maybe she was right. But maybe she wasn't, because. . . ."

He paused, but didn't meet Carrie's eye.

"Because you were in love with her," she prompted, remembering the dirty jokes but not meaning to imply anything sordid.

"Because I was in love with her," he echoed. Then, for the first time, he managed to surprise her. "I'd had sex with her, you know, long before we went to London. She lost her virginity when she was fifteen, long before . . . well, in the end, she said she'd show me how . . . teach me. So she did. She was very nice about it, and she stopped when she decided I'd got the hang of it, and wouldn't be too nervous with another girl . . . and I never asked her to do it again, or said that I wanted to, or anything. And I really didn't want to, much. She decided that she'd finished what she set out to do, and that was it. I didn't feel desperate about it, or even jealous of all the other boys she did it with . . . but I didn't feel, after I'd done it with Jo, that I wanted to do it with anyone else, either.

"I was at the opposite extreme, you see—my body chemistry didn't give me any trouble at all; it was always perfectly well-behaved. I was in love with her—completely, I suppose . . . but also quietly. Quite platonically, really, in spite of our brief interlude when we were seventeen.

"I coped with the ups and downs of her love life reasonably well, I think. I didn't try to calm her down when she was as high as a kite on her own hormones, but I was always ready with hot chocolate and sympathy when she came down again. Hot chocolate was our private ritual; we used to joke about its therapeutic value. It was the only medicine which really seemed to help.

"I was the one who fended off the aggrieved boyfriends when she got bored and couldn't face them any more, and I was the one who got soaked by tears when she sobbed her heart out because her passion of the month was unrequited or had led to disappointment. She asked me often enough what was wrong with her, and why she had to feel and behave the way she did, and at first I simply told her that it was just the way of things . . . but when things did go wrong I could hardly help thinking about it, and wishing I could do something to ease her grief and her



turmoil . . . and eventually I realized that just because it was just the way of things didn't mean that nothing could be done about it. So I set out to find a cure."

"A cure for love-sickness?" said Carrie—not because she was amazed, but because he had paused, and seemed to need a cue to carry on.

"That's right," he said. "It really *was* a kind of *sickness*. The fact that it wasn't caused by a virus or a bacterium was really secondary. It was a sickness whose effects—once you isolated the physical from the mental—were in many ways very like the effects of some virus-infections, and that made me think of treating it in the same way. Do you know what an antiviral is?"

"Vaguely," Carrie told him, hoping that she did know, because she didn't want him to think that she was too stupid to understand. "It's a new way of treating diseases—a new way of making people immune. The old way—the injections we all had when we were kids—worked on the body's immune system, making it produce antibodies which would kill the disease germs without it actually having to go through all the symptoms. Antiviruses bring a whole new defense-system into the body . . . I don't know the technical details. You'll have to explain that."

"It's not so very complicated," he said. "Viruses are lumps of DNA wrapped in protein coats. They can't survive long outside a living cell and they can only reproduce themselves by hijacking the apparatus which a host cell has for producing its own proteins and reproducing its own nucleic acids. They're an unfortunate by-product of evolution—they probably originated as fragments of the chromosomes of complex organisms.

"The immune system of a particular host eventually produces antibodies which attack the protein coat of a virus, preventing it from spreading any further, internally or externally. Because of this, the survival of viruses depends on their being able to induce certain symptoms in their hosts which allow them to infect further hosts before the current one stops them in their tracks. Coughs and sniffles are the commonest, because they're the most effective—when you have a cold you're forever getting virus particles on your hands, which you're then likely to pass on to everyone else you touch. The viruses which do best are the ones which regularly change their protein coats by mutation, so that the old antibodies no longer recognize them—they can circulate in the same population more-or-less indefinitely.

"The old method of treating virus diseases, as you say, was to find some way of making an immune system produce antibodies without the person actually catching the disease. Usually this involved producing a virus-substitute with the right protein coat but without the vicious DNA—but the fast-mutating viruses were always one step ahead of the

immunizers, and even slow-mutating ones could occasionally throw up a new mutant.

"One of the great achievements of virus engineering has been the production of antiviruses, which defend against the effects of hostile DNA rather than against protein coats. They take up residence in exactly those cells which a virus affects in order to make a body more infectious—the epithelial cells of the nose and the throat, and so on—and they prevent those cells from being disrupted by other incoming DNA. They don't prevent a virus invasion, but they prevent the *symptoms* of a virus attack from becoming manifest, and they make it very difficult for the virus to be passed on from one host to another.

"The effects of antiviruses are usually short-term ones, because we design most antiviruses with that aim in mind, but a prophylactic dose of anti-coryza will make sure that you can't catch a cold for a fortnight, and if you take a dose as soon as you catch cold it wipes out the symptoms in a matter of minutes. You know how easy it is to take—you just get a fresh cell-culture from the chemist and pop it on your tongue. Magic!

"Once we began working with that strategy, the common cold and flu were as good as dead. It's extinction time for the vast majority of viruses—not just human ones, but plant and animal viruses too. You've already lived through the first wave of successes. Within five years the only viruses still able to give us trouble will be the sexually transmitted ones. In another ten years' time, they'll be finished too—even the ingenious AIDS gang. The only viruses left will be the benign ones which we use as vectors in genetic engineering, which we'll be very careful to preserve. Then we'll get busy on the symptoms of non-virus diseases: the stress-related syndromes, the menstrual problems. Antiviruses can take care of the lot, given time for us to design them right."

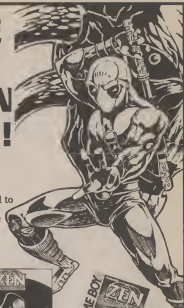
He paused, to check that Carrie was still following the argument. She nodded, to say that she was.

"The point is," said Don, "that even though Di's symptoms were purely psychosomatic, not caused by a virus at all, they could be *attacked* in exactly the same way. We were already trying to produce antiviruses to counter most of the symptoms that she had. In time, you see, she'd have been cured anyhow—as a by-product of cures issued for diseases with the same symptoms. It was just a matter of making up the right cocktail, and smuggling a dose out of the lab every time the symptoms began to show. I figured that two or three doses would be enough to break the bad biochemical habits which her body had formed, so that she'd be able to be sexually attracted to men without her whole system going haywire."

"Did it work?" asked Carrie, when he paused again.

"Yes and no," said Don. The words, spoken in a different way, might

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have been funny, or at least ironic—but there was nothing funny about the way he said them.

"What went wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "The symptoms disappeared. There were one or two minor side-effects, but nothing damaging. The biochemical habits which she'd somehow formed were well and truly broken. It's surprising how tenacious quirks of that kind can be—it's very easy to pick up idiosyncratic associations from one's earliest sexual experiences which get built into behavior as obsessive fetishisms—but when you attack them at the root, they can be exorcised.

"Think about that for a moment, Carrie. All the hang-ups people have—ranging all the way from the most innocent ones to the nastiest—can be unwound using antiviruses, provided that the person affected wants to be rid of them, and is willing to take an appropriately tailored antivirus whenever his or her particular symptoms develop. That's the future, Carrie—we'll be able to take control of our emotions, if only we want to do it badly enough.

"The trouble is, we might miss them once they're gone. Di did. When we'd abolished the symptoms, it felt to her as if we'd also abolished the emotion. What I tried to do was to transform her particular kind of love into something gentler and more reasonable—something more like mine. Maybe I really did do that . . . but she couldn't recognize what she had left as love. It seemed to her like something else entirely: something arid, and numb, and not worth having.

"I thought it was just a matter of getting used to it . . . I thought that with time, she'd adapt, and come to realize that what she had was a better kind of love than she'd had before. But she didn't have time. Her immune system was already failing, and the cancers were already spreading. One of the less fortunate corollaries of the great success of antiviruses is that it's become harder to pick up early warnings that the immune system is in trouble.

"Everything has its price, you see. . . .

"Jo died thinking that she'd lost an important kind of love, Carrie. She died thinking that she was incomplete. She never blamed me, and the one kind of love she was still sure she had was the kind she had for me. It was just that she thought she ought to have a different kind of love on top of that, for men who weren't her brother. I didn't see things the same way—but then, I never had a different kind of love for women who weren't my sister. Not then."

He looked so very sad that Carrie wanted to put her arms around him and hug him. It was a reaction which she knew only too well. She couldn't bear to see people hurt—especially people who bore their hurt with such ostentatious dignity and fortitude. Sympathy always flowed out of her.

Gavin had used that response of hers to make her forgive him again and again. Malcolm seemed to have learned it even before he could talk, and had *always* used it, over and over and over. . . .

She wanted to hug Don Sherrington. She also wanted him to hug her. She wanted them both to remember how full of promise the world had been when they were twelve years old and innocent. And she wanted . . . more.

But all she could find to say was: "What do you mean, *not then?*"

He studied her with his pale blue eyes, through the concave lenses of his spectacles. "The technique works either way," he said. "It's as easy to attach physical symptoms to emotions as it is to detach symptoms *from* emotions. That's how we get our hang-ups in the first place. I always *assumed*, you see, that my way of being was better than hers—that Jay's way was right and Jo's way was wrong. But I'd never tried any other way than my own.

"It's been five years since she died. I've tried three different cocktails since then. Three different sets of physical symptoms. It's very difficult to make the conditioning take—I guess people of our age are far less vulnerable to hang-up formation than teenagers are—but it can be done if you work at it. Science is never easy for pioneers, and aphrodisiac technology is only in its infancy.

"In twenty or thirty or forty years' time it will all be as simple as falling off a log, but for the time being . . . it's not. Even so, I've managed to do it, if only for short periods. I've experienced something like the kind of free-falling love that Di was stuck with, and a couple of others. How many more kinds there are, I don't know. I haven't even begun to figure out how much meaning there is in people's attempts to distinguish between the kinds of love they can feel naturally. Everyone I ask seems to have a different answer, though most people say that parent-love is very different from spouse-love, and sibling-love is different again. . . .

"You probably know more about that than I do. I'm pretty much a newcomer to the riot of different kinds of love, but you've probably been juggling half a dozen sets of symptoms all your life."

The import of what he was saying slowly sank in while he was saying it. She didn't know quite how to react to it—or whether the reaction which she felt ought to be discounted as just another set of symptoms.

"You've made viruses which make people fall in love?" she said, not quite sure that she had understood properly.

"No," he replied, patiently. "I've made viruses which can alter the biochemical corollaries of sexual arousal. The whole point is, you see, that there's no such thing as a pure emotion. Everybody experiences their emotions in a different way, because the feedback loops between sensory perception and biochemical response, mediated by consciousness,

depend on haphazard intersections of genetic priming and particular experience, which can send them in lots of different directions. In technical terms, you see, it's a Chaotic system. . . ."

He had lost her, and must have been able to see that in her expression.

"My viruses can't make people fall in love," he said, returning to the basics. "They can only alter the *kind* of loving feelings that people have. But that's not a trivial alteration, Carrie. It can make more difference than you might think."

She already knew that her question had been wrongly phrased, and she couldn't blame him for thinking she was dumb. But she wasn't. She really did see what he was getting at. She understood what he had tried to do for Di, and why the result hadn't been as obviously good as they might have wished. And she understood, too, how the implications of what he was saying affected her own predicament—her own particular sickness of the soul.

"What, exactly," she asked, more starkly than she had intended, "is this virus that you say you're carrying?"

"It's not infectious," he said, quickly. "It's not like a cold that you could catch from a touch. The only way you could possibly become infected would be . . ."

He trailed off in embarrassment, and she realized that it had crossed *his* mind too—not as an intention, but as a fantasy. He was lonely too; he too had lost his one true love . . . but that was getting silly.

"That's not what I asked," she pointed out. "Just suppose, for the sake of argument, that I did manage to pick it up. What, exactly, would it do to me?"

"It would make you feel slightly different," he said. "Not really *ill* . . . just different. But the effect would be intensified if you were then—in the brief period before you formed antibodies to combat the virus—to experience sexual arousal. It's tailored, you see, to affect the kinds of cells which are activated in particular ways by arousal. It's impossible to predict whether you'd think the altered sensations were better, or worse. That's largely a subjective thing. But they'd be different."

"And it wouldn't affect me otherwise?" she queried.

"Not as much," he said. "But other forms of arousal have biochemical correlates which overlap sexual arousal. The quality of any strong emotion—anger, grief, elation—would be altered."

"Less intense or more intense?" she asked.

He blushed again, as though the question were too personal to be asked; as, in a way, it was.

"Less," he said. "You see . . . I really didn't like Jo's kind of love. I really didn't like it at all. But at least I tried it—and when I had, I didn't

stop trying. I'm not complacent—not at all. I'm morally certain that I can improve on what nature and accident provided, if I keep experimenting. What I find will be an answer just for me, but in time—in twenty or thirty or forty years—*everyone* will be able to follow in my footsteps, looking for their own personal ideal state of mind.

"I want that, Carrie, I want that . . . for Jo's sake. I failed her . . . but I can make up for it, if I do the job properly."

Carrie looked at him long and hard. His face was still flushed; the last blush hadn't entirely faded away. The wine had helped to heighten his color a little. She saw his gaze settle to the face of the clock, and she saw him start with surprise as he realized how late it was.

"You don't have to go," she said quickly. "You can stay in Malcolm's room."

"Malcolm?" he said, in a puzzled tone. Then he remembered. "Oh—your son. What is he now, fifteen or sixteen? But he'll need the room himself, won't he?" He pronounced the last question haltingly, obviously realizing that the answer might well be no.

"He's gone," said Carrie, softly. "Gone to London, to stay with Gavin. To live with Gavin. They're both trying to make it, you see, whatever it is. Without me to hold them back. He's sixteen—in theory, I still have custody, but in practice . . . there's nothing I can do. He said that he hated living here. He said that he hated me. He said . . . well, you know how kids are. I remember what I was like, when I was that age . . . maybe you do too."

He looked at her hard, and she knew that he could see the tears which had formed in the corners of her eyes, threatening to fall if she could not control herself.

In the end, she had to lift a hand to wipe them away. "Only symptoms," she said. "That's all it is—only lovesick symptoms."

He didn't say anything. He was probably beset by confusions, and possibilities, and maybe even regrets, about the way he had blurted it all out, explanations and all.

Suddenly there was born in her a conviction that she was in control of this situation—that she could decide what would happen, and what would happen next . . . and how the future might now take shape. What Don Sherrington had told her he had told her because she had known him long ago, and had known Di too, and because that knowledge meant that even though she had not seen him for thirteen years, still she knew him better than anyone else, still they had the makings of an understanding.

She knew that what he'd told her wasn't really *that* big a secret. It was the kind of gosh-wow possibility you could read about every week in *The Guardian*. It wasn't truly *awful*. It certainly wasn't enough to bind them

together in a conspiracy of silence for the rest of their lives, even though it *was* the kind of news which might put the wind up all the people who thought virus engineering was a truly dangerous art. . . .

But he had told it to her. He had shared it with her. He had trusted her, because he remembered what she had been before her life had got out of hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, lamely, when he could bear the silence no longer. "I didn't mean . . ."

She knew that. She knew what he didn't mean.

"There's no need to be sorry," she said, wishing she had the courage to go to him *right now* and take his hand, and hoping that she could find it soon enough. "One way or another, we get over these things, don't we? In twenty or thirty or forty years' time it might be easier, but it's not impossible even now. And if I were to make a fool of myself over you, Don Sherrington, it wouldn't be because I wanted to catch your virus, or get a head start on the rest of the world in playing your wonderful new games. It would be because the past always has to end somewhere, and the future always has to begin, and now is always the best time."

She was proud of that speech, when she'd finished it. Intensely proud. And although she still had to wipe another pair of tears away from her eyes, and sniff to get rid of the others that were clogging up her nose, she didn't feel nearly as bad about it as she might have done. And she waited, very politely in spite of her anxiety, to hear what he might find to say in reply.

What he said was: "Have you got any hot chocolate?"

And when she said "yes," and he said "I'll make some," she felt reasonably certain that it was going to be all right, at least for tonight and tomorrow, and that it might just prove, in the end, to be the cure that she was looking for. ●

*—Special thanks to G. P. W. for retrieving missing text from a recalcitrant disk.*





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# THERE IS A SEASON

## Sonia Orin Lyris

In her August cover story, "A Hand in the Mirror," Sonia Orin Lyris took a deft look at the theoretical development of virtual reality. Now she shows us how VR's full realization may effect both life . . . and death.

---

A child's scream woke David. He grabbed his sword and tore out of the cabin he shared with his daughter and her family, into the first rays of the summer sun.

The scream came again. It was Mella crying, Sallea's five-year-old girl. David ran along the dirt path barefoot, following Sallea's angry shouts down to the storehouse.

He knew what it was. From over the hills and across the great lake, the thieves had come. It was the worst possible time, with Sallea's husband and son away. Their farm didn't have much, but they had two horses, some tools, and wine. Any of those would be enough, when thieves came looking for something worth stealing.

Instead they had found Sallea and Mella.

David held his sword ready as he rounded the top of the hill. In front of the storehouse were four men, two holding the horses' reins. The third man, heavily bearded, twisted Sallea's arms up behind her back, making her howl and curse. The fourth had ripped her shirt away from her bare breasts. Now he was starting on her trousers.

Twenty feet away from Sallea stood Mella, her long, blonde hair shining in the morning sun as she clenched handfuls of it in her fists and screeched like a bird.

David howled and charged. The horses shied and reared, and two of the thieves grabbed at the reins, struggling to keep the horses from running away. David swung his fist at the man in front of Sallea, knocked him to the ground with blood spurting from his face. The man behind Sallea pushed her roughly to the ground, drew his sword and turned to David. Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Sallea roll toward Mella and get to her feet.

"Sallea, run!" David yelled.

Behind him, Sallea cursed furiously. Mella's scream changed tone as her mother picked her up and ran.

The bearded man stood in front of David, grinning.

"We kill you. Take her," he said with a heavy accent. "Then we have fun. Cut her up."

In answer, David beat the thief's sword aside and thrust. The man deflected David's clumsy attack. Long before David was a farmer, he was a mercenary. This miserable thief would not suspect that. Not yet.

David took the next opening. With a twist and a drop, he slammed the hilt of his sword into the man's sternum, and put an elbow into his groin. The man grunted and crumpled. David fell with him, landing heavily on top. He took the man's head in a tight hold and twisted hard, sudden, and too far. The body under him went limp.

David leapt to his feet and turned to see the man with the bloody face standing again, a long knife in his hand. David jumped back, but not fast enough, and the knife dug into his stomach, the cut burning like fire. David twisted and lunged, sinking his blade deep into the man's middle. He turned away as the thief fell, trying to ignore the growing haze of pain that came from his own stomach.

The horses had run off and the other two thieves were nowhere in sight. Where had they gone? Sallea and Mella would not be safe from them, not without David. His breath came short and hard. He pressed his hand against the hot pain in his stomach, which oozed out around his fingers. He walked toward the house, stumbled.

Dizziness hit him, hard and sudden, and forced him to his knees. He struggled to stand, failed. The pain swept over him, crushing him to the ground. Every breath became a burning struggle.

Just as the world went dark around him, he heard Sallea's scream of outrage and terror.

David lay on something soft, his head cradled so snugly he could not move. For a moment all he heard was the sound of his own labored breathing, then a shoe brushed hard floor and clothing rustled in the darkness. He tried to see, couldn't.

He could not place the familiar, clean, sharp smell. Where was he?

"Mr. Cook?"

The voice was pleasant, businesslike. He recognized it dimly as a doctor's, as he recognized dimly that the name she spoke was his own. But the memory was very far away.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Cook?" the doctor asked.

He had to run. Sallea and Mella—where were they? He had to find them, to protect them. He had to get back.

Back where?

"Damn," David whispered.

"Mr. Cook?"

"Where am I?"

"You're in the Dreamstay Division of Memorial Hospital, Mr. Cook. You've been previewing 'Summer Lands.'"

"Previewing?"

"Yes, Mr. Cook, previewing a dream. Do you remember now?"

"Damn," he said. "Damn."

"You'll feel better soon, Mr. Cook. You've done this before."

"I hate coming back."

"I assume you enjoyed yourself, then? This might be the one you want to choose."

"Yes. Yes, this is the one. I have to go back to it. Go back now."

There was a pause. He heard her move close to him, felt the snug pressure around his head suddenly ease.

"I believe you said the same thing about 'Ocean Scape' and 'Station Luna,' Mr. Cook. Perhaps you should take a few days to think about it. You may need that much time to feel yourself again, anyway."

Himself. Who was that? He could still hear Mella's cry. Could it really have been only a dream?

"Turn on the lights," David said.

"Your granddaughter is here for you, Mr. Cook."

"Mella?"

He saw Mella's face as he had last seen her, frightened, her wide eyes framed by her long blonde hair.

"Jane Warren. Your granddaughter, Mr. Cook."

Another face came to David: unsmiling, with ruddy brown hair cut in straight lines. Allison's girl, Allison who he had done his best to raise alone after her mother's fatal accident. Allison, who he loved dearly, and who had finally found a nice young man and given birth to a baby. Jane.

"David?" came a familiar voice. A woman's voice. Too old for Jane's voice. It was familiar, but again, the memory was so far away he couldn't seem to grab hold of it.

"Allison?" David asked. "Have them turn on the lights, Ali. I can't see anything."

There was silence.

"Allison?"

"Why does this have to happen, every time?" the voice asked.

No, David realized, it was Jane's voice after all. She sounded weary and angry. Wasn't she in high school now? He wasn't sure.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Warren. The Dreamstay system can cause strong emotional reactions. And, sometimes, temporary amnesia, as you see now in Mr. Cook."

"You tell me this every time," Jane snapped. "I'm not stupid, and I do remember. I know what it does to him."

Jane was very upset. David would have to ask Allison what was wrong.

No, wait, there was something else. Something he'd forgotten. And

he'd forgotten it last time, too. What was it?

He tried to sit up and felt a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Best give it a few more minutes, Mr. Cook," the doctor said.

"Why? I feel fine, I just can't see, is what, and—" he tried to sit up again.

Something hurt, in his stomach, and all the way down to his legs. Something he'd forgotten.

The memory hit him.

"I'm blind," he said.

He heard Jane sigh, recalled hearing it before.

"He doesn't *want* to remember," she said, irritation lacing her voice.

He was remembering now, remembering it all, and wishing he wasn't.

"And the cancer," he said. "Ah, God."

"Mr. Cook," the doctor said, "You're here to—"

"Choose a dream. Damn it, I know. Shut up."

He heard Jane's bitter laugh. "I think it makes him worse, doctor, all this dreaming. He wakes up and then he's like this, irritated and nasty. What's the point, he's going to die anyway, and then all the dreams stop, all at once, they just stop—"

"Shut up, Jane," David said. "Shut up. It's not yours. You don't understand. It's my death. My dream."

"Please," the doctor said. "Ms. Warren, Mr. Cook. I know this is hard for both of you. Please try not to—"

"I'm sick of this!" Jane said. "Week after week, he does your goddamned previews. Then he talks about them over and over as if they were the real world and this was the dream. I'm nothing, I'm just a goddamned chauffeur, taking him here and back every week! It's like I don't exist. First Mom and now this. I can't stand it."

"What? Allison . . . ?" David frowned at the blank spot in his memory. A bright red warning pain was there, all around the blank spot.

Jane's voice was suddenly, startlingly soft. "Never mind that, Grampa. Don't even think about it. It's okay."

But it was too late. David could not back away from the memory fast enough. It washed over him like a wave.

Allison had died five years ago, from the same cancer that was now eating David's insides. She had died in Dreamstay, too, living in another world, dreaming while the best medical life-support available kept her alive, less and less of her alive as the cancer ate, until the day when there wasn't enough left of her to dream.

"This is what I have to look forward to?" Jane's voice was soft and tight and pained. "This is it?"

David felt a burning behind his eyes. He blinked, and tears slipped down the sides of his face.

"Oh, Grampa," Jane whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." He felt her face warm against his wet cheek, her hand tight on his. "It's all right. You dream. It's good for you to dream."

"I wish," David said. "Jane, I wish—"

"I know, Grampa. I know. Please don't—" she caught her breath. "Don't say it."

He only had one more wish. It was time to use it.

"This," David said, his voice hoarse, "is a good dream. This is the one, Doctor. You hear me?"

"Give it a few days, Mr. Cook. Take some time to think it over."

"No, damn it! No more time, no more days. Just bring me the contract so I can give you my money and we can get on with it."

"Mr. Cook, please—"

"No. Just do it. Now."

Jane was crying, very quietly, her hand squeezing David's hand tightly. Somehow her hand on his made it clear to him, that this was the right dream, the right decision.

The last decision.

"Now," he said, his voice soft. "Doctor, please."

"All right, Mr. Cook," the doctor said. "All right."

David blinked and the darkness cleared. He pressed himself up from the hard-packed dirt. His head hurt, but the dizziness no longer claimed him, and he felt a new surge of strength. With it came hope. He wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his sword and struggled to his feet.

Blood caked his fingers and stained his torn shirt. He pulled the shirt away from his stomach, daring at last to look. It was only a scratch after all, and not the death wound he had thought.

He heard Sallea's angry cry and Mella's scream. He turned and raced up the path, grateful that only moments had passed since he fell unconscious.

A new, fine, fury burned inside him, speeding him along the path. If either of them was hurt, he thought with contained rage—even so much as a scratch—he would flay the thieves, then cut them into pieces, a square inch at a time.

David felt fierce joy. Somehow he had a chance to save his family, when he had thought all his chances were gone. There was a mystery here, too, something he could not quite bring to mind, but for some reason he didn't want to try to understand it; instead he would turn away from it, bury it deep inside forever.

For this moment, though, as he ran toward his daughter and her daughter, to save them, he let himself rejoice. This time, he was somehow certain, he would succeed. ●



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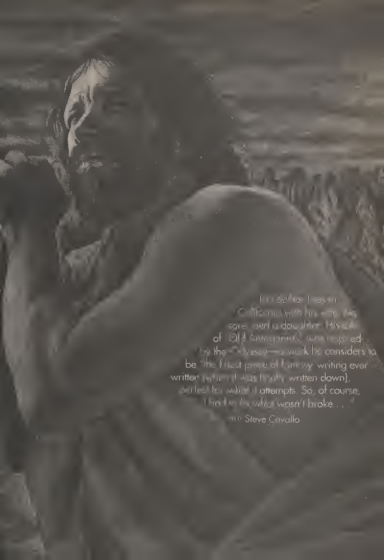
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# OLD ANTAGONISTS

W. M. Shockley





him before I was in  
California with his wife. His  
son, even a daughter. His idea  
of Old Testament, was inspired  
by the Old Testament—work he considers to  
be the first piece of literary writing ever  
written (even if it was finally written down),  
and he has waited it attempts. So, of course,  
I find it in his wallet wasn't broke . . .

—Steve Cavallo

Penelope knew, of course, that the beggar with Telemachos was Odysseus. The clothes and the posture had thrown her off at first, and the voice, which he'd disguised while speaking to Antinoos—but then he had given himself away with his interest in the bow. And in her. No beggar would look at her in such a manner.

He really gave himself away when he strung the bow—only noble Odysseus could do that. And when he killed Antinoos and his followers, and Antinoos's children, the two boys. *Her* children, too, but taken by Antinoos early for him to rear as "real men." She had rejoiced to see the arrow dig into Antinoos's neck, see the blood gout out. It had bothered her with the boys, though—*his* boys, arrogant, yes, overbearing like their father, but still her boys, too, and once sweet babes in arms.

She didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to feel. Odysseus, home after twenty years. Odysseus, back long after the report of his death. She, married and defiled by the worst of her suitors. What right had she to joy with her Odysseus drowned? And so she chose the worst suitor, so that she might always experience grief. And now that grief was ended.

The house, the palace—she might now think of it as a palace again and not a prison—Odysseus had had cleansed and purified, had scrubbed it clean of blood, had blown smoke over the walls.

"Well?" he asked, standing before her, resplendent again, anointed, kingly. There was no mistaking him now. Odysseus, her young lover, grown to full manhood. He could have had her killed, also.

She tried a smile, but it would not stay on her lips.

"Come on, woman," he said, clearly out of patience. She, too, was out of patience—eager for what, she knew, would come, but still shyly unwilling. With Antinoos, she had not been shy in her unwillingness.

"It is time," he said more quietly. "It is past time, twenty years past the time!"

"But . . ." she managed to object.

He shook his head sadly, a gesture she remembered from twenty years before, when Menelaos came for him for the war. Always the smart one, Odysseus didn't wish to go. "What is glory?" he had asked her. She'd had no answer for him, nor he for her, except the vain attempt to remain with his wife and his newborn son, Telemachos.

"What more do you want from me? You know. You *know* I am Odysseus." She did know. "Shall I describe for you the bed you have neglected for so many years?"

At the mention of the bed, her knees weakened. The bed which he had built himself, built secretly for her, behind the bolted door. The bed which she had ceaselessly guarded from Antinoos and from everyone else.

She might have made a noise or stumbled. And then Odysseus had her in his arms.

RUN/STOP

Hulian didn't want to watch the happy ending again. Every happy ending, every love scene between Odysseus and Penelope, was like a bronze-tipped arrow in Hulian's heart. The faithful wife rewarded.

"There's time for another run," Rossiter suggested. "I could set it up for you." Always so solicitous on the days he had to "leave early." On the days he sneaked away to meet Gracie.

How could she *do* it? This was the unanswered and unanswerable question that plagued Hulian—how could his wife do it?

"Happy endings!" Hulian snorted disgustedly. Life didn't deal in happy endings. Not when it involved men and women. Husbands and wives.

"A woman's book needs a happy ending," Rossiter said. Rossiter had been reading criticism again: Homer was two people, a man for the *Iliad*, a woman for the *Odyssey*.

"Women!" Hulian said. "The only faithful ones are in fiction!" Testing. Rossiter didn't react at all—he was good that way. He hadn't reacted when Hulian hired him to do the programming for the *Odyssey* Project either, not even to ask, "why me?" Hulian found that significant. He wondered if Gracie had told Rossiter about her recommendation. When Hulian first told him about the program and his idea, Rossiter had laughed, saying that it would be a monumental waste of time, like all "art" programs. But he had agreed it would be a programming challenge—almost an *ex nihilo* creation of an A.I. Harder than that, really, because the intelligence had *already* been created, over three thousand years ago. In a book, in the *Odyssey*. And Rossiter had done it, had created an Odysseus who was as resilient and wily as the Odysseus of Homer, and an Ithaka that seemed real in all the simulations. Too real, sometimes.

When Gracie had suggested that Hulian should talk to Rossiter, he had had his doubts. But he had been wrong—Rossiter was everything he could have wanted in a programmer. Everything and too much more.

"Let's make her have twin *daughters*," Hulian said, testing again. "Daughters that look just *like* her."

Nothing, again. Either Rossiter had the greatest poker-face in history, or he didn't *know* about Gracie's visit to the doctor.

The changes in the last run didn't seem to have changed a thing: Odysseus didn't bat an eyelash before killing Antinoos, his people, and

his children. Penelope was shy or cautious as usual at first . . . but only at first. Maybe *this* change would actually make a difference, though.

"How do you come *up* with these ideas?" Rossiter asked, not for the first time. Hulian didn't dare tell him where *this* idea had come from, so he shrugged.

"Same parameters otherwise?" Rossiter asked.

"Oh, yes, certainly. Fine-tuning is everything now. I feel like this will be the one where we *get* him." He had told Rossiter that this was the aim of the Odyssey Project: to break down Odysseus. Hulian had been fine-tuning the program for three months now, moving ever closer to the real situation he wanted to address: Rossiter and Gracie, the unfaithful wife, and how to deal with her.

Without killing her. Because, faithful or not, he still loved her. He didn't love *Rossiter*, though. Useful or not, he did not love Rossiter. Au contraire.

Quickly Rossiter found and edited the sub-routine that would change the children Penelope had by Antinoos from two sons (aged six and five) to twin daughters aged six. It was impossible to believe the amount of code that Rossiter had memorized. He typed his instructions on an old-style I.B.M. PC keyboard—he said it was how he learned to program, so he had typed ever since, even though he had to pay extra for a keyboard. "Mainline, from Book Fifteen?" Book Fifteen was where the changes might become clear.

"Yes."

Rossiter stood up from the keyboard, hit a key and said, "See you later." He headed out the door, not knowing how soon later would be.

RUN

Odysseus picked at the last of the meat on the bone. It was better fare than he deserved, dressed as he was in the rags of a beggar, better than he had expected. It did his heart good to know that Eumaios treated strangers with such respect and courtesy, no matter what their station. But it was time to push off, to push on, to leave the safety of Eumaios and the herdsman in the mountain hut. He had had the night to consider the status of things, but had failed yet to reach a decision. How *could* he reach a decision? The gods wouldn't allow that—Athena had deserted him before, he knew. His heart, while rent and saddened at the news of Penelope, was gladdened by the true loyalty of Eumaios.

"I see," Eumaios said, "that you have come to a decision, stranger."

"One decision, yes, kind Eumaios, but not the important one. It is time

I head down from Raven's Rock, away from the well at Arethusa and its sweet water, back toward the port, to see the lay of the land."

"You'll not put back to sea, having so recently come ashore from your many travails?" Eumaios asked. He was a good man, concerned now for the safety of a stranger, even a beggar, beloved of Zeus. Odysseus had told Eumaios of his adventures, of course—the best lie sails nearest the truth—withholding only his name. He could not determine if the wily swineherd had guessed the truth. With the questions he'd asked about Penelope, such a guess was not implausible. If so, the swineherd said nothing.

"As to that, I have not decided. Perhaps I shall visit the palace of King Odysseus first—"

"King Antinoos," the herdsman said gruffly from the corner of the room, his only comment during the entire meal.

"King Antinoos' palace, then," Eumaios said softly, loath to make the correction. After all these years, it was plain that the man still loved his first king, Odysseus.

Although he wanted to ease Eumaios' pain, still Odysseus said nothing in reply. Care first, and caution. He tossed the bone onto the bone pile. At least his swineherd ate well, he thought, as did the herdsman, who had said little, who probably did not share Eumaios' generosity toward strangers. Would they warn Antinoos, he wondered, that a stranger was in the mountains asking after Penelope? Eumaios, certainly not. But the herdsman might. Would Antinoos even care if he did? He would fear a beaten old beggar not a grain. In any case, the herdsman would not risk the chance of earning Antinoos's wrath—best for a herdsman to stay among the crags with his herd, the swineherd with his swine, and leave the affairs of kings to kings.

"Perhaps we shall meet again, kind Eumaios, under more favorable circumstances." Odysseus stood up and made for the opening of the hut. Since the day had been hot, the door had lain against the wall inside the hut. In the cool of evening, Eumaios would replace it.

"I hope it may be so," Eumaios said, poised on the cliff-edge of further speech. The herdsman muttered some words, but whether it was in agreement with Eumaios or not, Odysseus could not discern. They would remain in the mountains, away from the palace—Odysseus knew this as if Athena herself had told him.

Eumaios got up creakily, straightening his bones as he rose. He walked with Odysseus through the opening, into the fading light of afternoon. The view from the high hut was impressive: the rocks—always the rocks—of Ithaka falling away to the meadows where the flocks fed, thence to the town and the harbor, beyond which the ocean glistened peacefully. Odysseus knew that the peacefulness was a lie, an illusion

produced by distance. The sea was neither peaceful, calm, nor kind. Poseidon, when angered, made a ferocious enemy, as Odysseus had learned repeatedly during his wanderings.

"I wanted to speak alone for a moment, stranger," Eumaios said quietly.

"It is your abode," Odysseus said. "You may do as you wish, subject only to your king's wishes."

"Yes," Eumaios agreed. "Subject to my king's wishes." He said nothing for a moment. "But which king?" he asked, almost in a whisper. "Antinoos, who lives in the palace with my queen, or Odysseus, who—"

"Speak plainly, man," Odysseus ordered, regretting the tone of his voice, a tone which became not a beggar but a king.

"Perhaps," Eumaios said, "it is an old man's fancy to wish to see his king once more before he dies."

"Once more, at least," Odysseus said. "That much I promise." And with that promise, he found that he had decided something of his course of action.

"I would embrace you, sir," Eumaios said, leaning against the wall of the hut, "but I fear that the herdsman cannot be trusted. He comes of Antinoos' flock."

"Once more, at least."

"King Odysseus' son, Telemachos, visits here often," Eumaios said. "He enjoys hearing of his father from one who knew him well; so we talk."

"Is he expected this evening?" Odysseus asked quickly. That would be too much to ask.

"He is never expected, but often arrives in time to witness the sun's fiery descent and to eat with an old swineherd—in truth, to be away from his supposed king, Antinoos."

"Once more," Odysseus said as he walked away from Eumaios.

The sun rode its chariot low in the westering sky, still above the western isles. If he hurried, he might reach the port before dark. If he wished. As befits an old beggar, he walked slowly the paths he had played on as a child, as if they were paths he had never seen before. The rocks looked familiar to him, but only as rocks looked familiar everywhere on islands. Circe's island had rocks like this, and Calypso's. As all had remained the same, so all had changed in twenty years. It was among these very paths that he had wooed and won Penelope, though the wooing was easy and the winning foregone.

Penelope.

He had not walked far before he sat on a jagged rock to watch the sun's descent, perhaps to wait for a son. He felt the sharp peak of the rock through his rough cloak. What made the rocks? he wondered. What made

them that they were so similar on all the islands about, so different from those at Troy?

Penelope, twenty years later, married these six years to Antinoos, mother of twin girls. He could not fault Penelope for her actions, not since hearing the report that Eumaios had given him.

Antinoos, the best and worst of the suitors for her hand, had brought her proof of Odysseus's death, a bracelet from his very hand, lost in the sinking of his ship, and a crewman who survived and saw Odysseus go down into the cold, cold sea, smashed overboard by a wall of wave, Poseidon's curse. Odysseus had gone down into the sea, but he had found an amphora that had been swept over with him, hugged it with as much fervor as a newly-wed embraces his newly-wed wife, until he washed ashore.

He had discovered that his bracelet was missing, but had other things to mourn. So much else, so much of importance, was *also* missing, swept away: his ship, his crew—those left after the misfortunes that had dogged the ship—his home, his wife, his son. His wife, gentle Penelope—Penelope of the doe eyes, the black hair, the firm thighs. In the commonly held opinion, Helen was more beautiful, but to Odysseus, no woman surpassed Penelope. None even approached her. And now, and for six years past, another man had had her in his bed. . . .

She had mourned him longer than she should have, for three full years after the news of his death, and then picked the best man she could find. Odysseus knew nothing of Antinoos, except that he had come among the flock of suitors and proved the best in Penelope's eyes. And that Telemachos avoided him when he could, not an unusual act.

Except, of course, that the *true* best man in Penelope's eyes was still alive, returned now to Ithaka to reclaim—

—to reclaim *what*?

These were the thoughts of Odysseus as he sat beside the rocky path which led finally to the sea. Everything in mild Ithaka led finally to the sea.

The sea, sweet escape. Should he take a ship and head to sea again? Leave Penelope to her new life, unmolested by the past? Ignore his son, Telemachos, whom he had not seen in twenty years, left as a suckling babe? The babe who had proved Odysseus's sanity when he tried to avoid going to the war for Helen in the first place. He had been sowing his field with salt instead of seed when the babe Telemachos was put in front of the plow. Odysseus veered the plow, saved his son, and proved that he was not mad. And so off he went to the ten years' war, and then a ten years' returning.

Should he, he wondered, live his life never knowing how his own son looked?

Indecision—more Hamlet's domain than Odysseus'; more Hulian's than either.

"What should I do?" Hulian asked the frozen holo of Odysseus on the platform in front of him. "What should I *do*?" Odysseus wouldn't answer him—or perhaps he *would*, if the question were asked in the proper language. For that, though, he needed *Rossiter*, the very cause of the problem. Unless he were clever enough himself—wily enough—to get Rossiter to ask without *knowing* what he was asking. He was working toward this goal.

He got up from his stool and stretched, then walked to the large utility closet and opened the door. The bow sat in the corner, quiet as always, unstrung. Waiting. It was a double-torsion bow, specially made for Hulian in Greece out of native olive wood, stored unstrung to save the "bounce" in the wood. The bowstring was of goat gut, the arrows bronze-tipped.

He hefted the bow, examined it for cracks and wormholes. How many times had he seen *Oydsseus* do that? He had tried to string it once, had come close, but had had to give up. He took the bow and string back with him to the desk on which the computer sat, and rested them against the stool. He decided that Rossiter had had enough time to get to Hulian's house. Hulian opened the drawer in the desk and flipped the switch which was recessed in the under part of the desk top. Then he turned on the remote feed.

Odysseus and Ithaka were gone. In their place on the platform was a holo of Hulian's bedroom at home. Blessedly empty. He checked the other rooms of the house that were wired. Unless Gracie was in the master bathroom, she wasn't home.

He decided to return to the Odyssey Project—he could check home again at any time. He turned off the remote, and Ithaka reappeared on the platform with the frozen Odysseus. Since this run had been so similar to those in the past, he wanted to jump ahead to see what happened in Book Sixteen, to see if there were any changes there. He could always jump ahead to Book Twenty-One to see how it all turned out.

If Menelaos, the betrayed husband, could take his wife Helen back,



after she had run willingly off with Paris and lived for ten years with him, then Odysseus could, *would* take Penelope back.

He would utterly destroy all vestige of her false husband, all trace of him, leaves and trunk and roots and seeds, and he would take back his rightful wife. This he decided while sitting on the rock, waiting for the sun to drop behind the western isles. He would wait until after dark before visiting his palace. It were best not to be seen until he had a plan firmly in mind. In the matter of a plan, though, Athena had neglected him: he had no plan.

Running steps interrupted his thoughts. A fine, dark youth crested the hill and nearly ran into Odysseus.

"What is your hurry, thin one?" he asked the startled youth.

"I neglected to bring a torch and the footing after dark here is treacherous. I hope to be at Eumaios' hut before the light from Helios is denied me."

Telemachos, of course. He'd recognized the boy immediately from his nose, Penelope's fine nose, and the eyes, eyes which he had seen often enough reflected in shields, or in calm water.

"Rest here a while with an old man first. The moon shall guide your steps after the sun has fallen into the sea. Selene rises full tonight, eager to visit her secret love, Endymion."

"Come with me, stranger, and I can promise you a full stomach."

"I would rather fill my soul with your words."

Telemachos sat down on his haunches, looked Odysseus directly in the eye. "Why do you say that, old one?"

"I have already partaken of food," Odysseus replied with a smile.

"Gah," Telemachos said, standing again. He was sundered by doubt, wishing to hurry on, wanting to wait. Odysseus made the choice for his son.

"I knew your father, the great Odysseus."

Telemachos sat back on his haunches and then fell back onto the ground, raising scant dust. "In Priam's citadel?" he asked quietly.

"And before, and after."

"Was he as crafty as they say? Eumaios says he never saw anyone who could match my father for wits. But Eumaios has not seen all that many people."

"What wits he had, he always attributed to Pallas Athena," Odysseus answered.

"When did you see him last?" Telemachos asked, leaning forward, elbows resting on knees.

"Does not your stomach call you onward to the swineherd?"

"Did you stop me to abuse me with obliqueness?"

It was, Odysseus knew, a fair question. He had stopped his son in order

to see him, to speak to him, to learn what the boy knew. Had he stopped him to tell him who he was?

Athena had offered no guidance in this matter. Usually Odysseus saw a clear-cut path to his desired end. Here, though, were brambles, snares, a multitude of paths.

He had to decide which path to take.

"How fares your mother, the doe-eyed Penelope?"

"Answer you my questions before I answer yours."

"Yield to a stranger, and one who is your elder, the advantage in this. Answer me first, and I, in turn, shall answer you."

Telemachos gathered his legs beneath him and sat up again. "Penelope, my mother, endures."

"Does she laugh? Does she smile the smile—" Odysseus bit off the words he was about to say. The memory of Penelope's musical laughter. . . .

"Rarely does she laugh. With her twin daughters, Denathia and Alcaria, sometimes she forgets her grief, but she is a somber mother."

"For whom does she grieve?"

"For him about whom you have old news for me."

Odysseus liked the obliqueness in Telemachos's answer. He would reveal himself to his son, but not before he had the answers to more questions.

"And her husband, does he grieve also? What manner of man is he?"

Telemachos stood suddenly and walked away from Odysseus a few paces, stamped his thonged foot on the packed earth. With his back to Odysseus he said, "Ask me not of Antinoos. Ask me not!"

That answer was enough for Odysseus. "One question more before I answer yours: how fares your grandfather, the ancient Laertes—is he still in the world, or has he gone to visit Persephone in her abode, a victim of old age and of life's grief?"

"He fares better than my mother. He lives in a stone house outside the town in the midst of a garden which he has claimed from weed and rock. He tends fruit trees there now, and figs, and olives, and almonds, and flowers for their beauty and scent."

When he had settled the matter of Antinoos and his foul breed, Odysseus would visit the aged Laertes, his father. "Ask me now your questions."

Telemachos returned to Odysseus. The western isles had split the sun, one half above, one half descended already to the Underworld. The clouds above had taken some of the color from the sun, streaking orange and pink across the dome of heaven, sending the hues to the east for rosy-fingered Dawn to find in the morning.

"When saw you him last?"

"When he set foot again on fair-favored, craggy Ithaka." In the gleam

of a serving dish he had received as a parting gift from Alcinoos and the Phaeacians, he had truly seen himself.

"Which means naught," the boy said with rising wrath. "He has never yet set foot here again, never since he sailed for far Troy."

"He about whom I have old news for you set foot on Ithaka yesternorn."

Telemachos took Odysseus by the shoulders and lifted him from the rock on which he sat. "They say Odysseus is dead."

Odysseus paused before saying, "*They say? I say I am quick.*"

"Father?" Telemachos asked. His fingers bit into Odysseus' shoulders.

"The only proof I can give you now is faithful Eumaios' testimony—and he will be hesitant to speak before the goatherd."

"Father?" Telemachos repeated. They were embracing now, shedding tears. "But how?"

"That, son, is a long story, one which I shall tell over the dinner fires, when we are home."

RUN/STOP

Hulian couldn't watch any more of the scene. It was virtually the same as the one he had watched in the morning anyway.

He flipped the remote, and the *Odyssey* scene vanished. No one was in the bedroom, but in the living room Rossiter sat on the wingback chair that Gracie guarded so jealously. He was holding a drink. A quick flip found Gracie in the kitchen, humming to herself, mixing another drink. She walked to the living room, sat on the ground at Rossiter's feet, put her elbows on his lap.

She shouldn't be drinking, Hulian thought—not if she were pregnant with twins. Rossiter's twins.

"You're sure he'll be late?" she asked.

"Yes. Anyway, I put an alarm-bug at the driveway gate, so we'll have a few minutes' warning." He put his hand on Gracie's head. She leaned away and kissed it. A very loving gesture from a woman he had not known to be demonstrably loving in many years.

"What did you do today?" she asked.

"Do we have to talk about it?" Rossiter asked. "Six hours of Odysseus is enough!"

"We don't have to talk at all," Gracie said. She finished her drink and put her head between Rossiter's knees. Rossiter laughed, took her chin in his hand.

"There's time enough for that," he said. "Let me finish this in peace."

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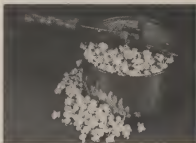
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He held up his glass, sipped from it. "You know what he did today? To the program, I mean."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"It's just that he's so damn *fast* in coming up with ideas to trip Odysseus up. Why does he want to outsmart him so much?"

"He was a writer himself once, before he caught the computer bug—maybe he's competing with Homer."

"No. Well, maybe yes. I don't know. He's trying to run it now with Penelope married to Antinoos—" Gracie nodded her head; she knew all about this. Of course she did. Hulian had been telling her about it for the last few weeks. "And now he's rigging it so that she has twin girls by him."

Hulian saw Gracie's reaction. She flinched visibly. She knew—even if Rossiter *didn't*. Twin girls was too much of a coincidence for her. His warning had been received.

If only she would take it to heart.

"Does he know about us?" she asked.

Rossiter laughed again. "Why ask *me*? You'd be the one to know. Why?"

She started to say something. "No," she finally said, "I'll tell you later. Let's go to bed."

"Bed?" Rossiter asked. "Bed, as in the bedroom where you never let me go?"

The bedroom that contained the beautiful four poster bed that Gracie had picked out in an antique shop because she liked the wood so much.

"Yes, bed," Gracie said. She climbed up from the floor, stopped to kiss Rossiter, took the glass from his hand, and went to the kitchen, where she rinsed both glasses and put them in the dishwasher. No evidence that way, Hulian realized. How careful she had been, and how careless, too.

They went to the bedroom, she with her arm around his waist, he with his hand on her rump.

Hulian debated whether he wanted to watch the scene that was about to take place in his bedroom, in his own bed. Nothing could be gained from watching, he decided. He knew they would do the deed, as they had done it before, and as they would probably continue to do until he did something to stop them.

"In the holy of holies?" Rossiter asked.

Gracie laughed a laugh such as Hulian had never heard before.

Hulian watched, oddly excited, oddly repelled at the same time. And when he turned his attention back to his own actions, he found that he had strung the double-torsion bow without conscious effort, without even thinking about it.

"Book Twenty-One," he said to himself, as he restarted the Odyssey.

RUN

She had been sitting in her room, upstairs, thinking again, always thinking—thinking was an escape from . . . she didn't know exactly from what she had to escape—only that there was no escape. Every day, every action tied her more firmly to this world, to the world of Denathia and Alcaria, to the world of Antinoos, and took her further away from the world of Telemachos—poor Telemachos, without a father to bring him to manhood. Poor Penelope, without Odysseus.

She had been brooding about this when Eurykleia brought the news that Telemachos was in the palace. What was the cause of this rashness, she wondered, that Telemachos dared enter the palace that had been forbidden to him by the order of Antinoos not three days before? She went down to find her son before Antinoos returned from his sport, to warn him away from the deadly anger of her husband. Her husband. A foul usage of the term. A mockery of its true meaning.

In the receiving room, she saw that Telemachos had brought a beggar to the palace, another stick with which to prod the hornets' nest of Antinoos' wrath. She could at least see that the two received food before she bade them leave, not the act of the kind hostess she would wish to be, but all she could do.

The beggar, a tall man without the posture of a beggar, stood back from her, remained behind Telemachos, peering out at her.

"Sit," she commanded the two, "and eat, before the lord of the palace returns."

The beggar stepped forward and opened his mouth to speak, but no sound issued forth. He stepped to one of the couches and sat.

"Thank you, mistress," the beggar said, his voice rough, uncouth.

"I have brought him here, Mother, because he says he knew Father."

He did not look the type to have known Odysseus, she thought at first. But then she remembered Odysseus, always interested in everyone, in every kind of person. And this man might not always have been a beggar: twenty years before, on the way to Troy, or even ten years before, on the way back, he might have encountered Odysseus. It had been so long since there had been any mention of Odysseus except by Telemachos. And Eumaios, when she spoke to him. Still, claiming to know the master of the house—the *former* master—was the most common trick a beggar had by which to get a meal. Early on, eager for any news, Penelope had fed an army of such beggars, beggars with a multitude of conflicting news, all false.

"You need say nothing, stranger, in order to have a healthy meal," she said.

"He told me," the beggar said, "of a double-torsion bow which only he could string, and of axeheads lined in a row, through which he was wont to shoot."

This beggar *had* known Odysseus, then, or known one who knew him well. The bow was no secret, nor the axeheads—Penelope had thought to use them to choose the best of the suitors, before realizing that she did not *want* the best of the suitors to marry, but the *worst*, Antinoos. She had mentioned the possible test, but had never unlocked the storeroom of Odysseus' treasures, had never shown the bow, had never said that it was a double-torsion bow, not even to Antinoos when she tormented him with the feats of Odysseus.

"You have told me of such a bow, Mother," Telemachos said. A noise from outside indicated that the outer gate had been opened. "I think the time is ripe for me to have a feel of the bow, to test my strength against that of my father."

Eurymachos tripped into the room followed closely by Melanthios, full grown men too old to act the part of silly boys. Both had been drinking, both held silver goblets that once had graced the table of Odysseus. No doubt the wine, unmixed, had come from those stores laid down so many years before, stores which must soon run dry, as Antinoos had done little to replenish them.

"Fair lady," Melanthios said before falling onto his knees. "Your master is—"

"Antinoos is—" Eurymachos said.

"I am here," Antinoos bellowed, striding into the room. "And who is this scruff? And what is that impudent boy doing here? Can you entertain such a whelp behind my back? In my house?" He started toward Penelope, but the beggar put himself between them.

"O-o-h," Melanthios said.

"A-h-h," Eurymachos echoed.

Antinoos raised his hand to strike the beggar. The beggar made no move to defend himself, neither did he back away from the threat.

"I have come for my father's bow," Telemachos said.

"Odysseus' famous bow! I'm sick unto *death* of hearing of Odysseus' bow! Take it, and be gone with you!" During his speech, his hand had dropped back to his side. "Take it, *and* your noble friend here with you."

The beggar smiled. "I would never remain in a house in which I was not wanted," he said mildly, his voice neither rough nor uncouth.

Antinoos frowned. Something moved in his face—a prickle of fear?

Penelope said, "Remain here, stranger, until I have returned, so that you might have a meal at least from the generosity of Antinoos." She



left the room, pulling Telemachos behind her, stopped Telemachos outside the receiving room, while she ran to her room for her hook. She would open the long-locked storeroom of Odysseus' treasures. She would give Telemachos the bow, against which he might pit his strength. She would take out the axeheads also. It was time that Antinoos measured his skills in a real test against those of Odysseus. Penelope knew how short of Odysseus he was in all things; it was time he received proof of his inferiority firsthand.

The storeroom was far from the receiving room. The cracked leathern strap which was tied between the twin doors had not been disturbed. When she untied the thong, it came to pieces in her hand. She used the hook to shoot the bolts on the other side of the door. Odysseus had shown her how to accomplish the feat twenty years before.

It was as if he had never left. The doors bellowed open, like a bull in a field on a fine spring day. It was fortunate, she thought, that Antinoos had never seen the inside of this room: the scented chests of fine robes, the bright bowls, the gifts from other suitors, the weapons. Had Antinoos seen these they would have gone the way of Odysseus' flocks and his storehouse of wine.

Penelope walked to the polished olive wood bowcase which hung against the back wall. A fine layer of dust covered every item in the room, as if some god had shed earthen tears for Odysseus.

She removed the bowcase from its peg. Odysseus' bow—she held it in her hands.

"Cease with your tears, Mother. The time for them is well past."

"You are correct, Telemachos, you are correct." She hefted the quiver of copper-tipped arrows. "Bring the basket of axeheads," she said, pointing them out for her son. "We shall have some sport of Antinoos before you leave."

"What is this foolishness?!" Antinoos demanded when they returned to the receiving room. The beggar had not left, was still standing near the tall door. Neither had Melanthios or Eurymachos left—they had sprawled themselves on couches, too drunken, perhaps, to sit straight.

"Odysseus' bow, his arrows, and his axeheads."

The beggar came forward, reached out for the bowcase, but Antinoos was on him from behind, pulling him away. "Leave that, you scum! Do you think you are worthy to touch this bow?"

"Do you?" the beggar asked insolently, rising to a kingly posture.

"Why do I even speak to such as you?" Antinoos muttered. He grabbed the bowcase from Penelope. He would open it, string the bow, and shoot the beggar dead. Penelope could see it in his face. She could see by the beggar's face that he, too, saw Antinoos' thoughts. His face, though, held not fear, but scorn, scorn for Antinoos.

She knew the look.

"No!" she said in surprise.

She knew the man.

"Instruct me not, woman," Antinoos said, "on the treatment of guests."

Odysseus—here, again, in her house, in his palace. "No," she repeated behind her hand. To have him again so close—even the thought of the chance of losing him again was too great to bear.

Could he really be alive? Was Odysseus clever enough to return from the dead? Could he duplicate the feats of Herakles?

Antinoos struggled with the bow, bending his back but not the fine wood. The loop in the bowstring moved not a whit closer to the wood.

"Impossible!" he said, as he threw the bow to the ground. The beggar, Odysseus, flinched at the treatment the bow had received.

Telemachos picked it up. "I shall try," he said. He looked at Odysseus. Telemachos knew, too—knew, and had not told Penelope. Odysseus nodded his head—go ahead.

Telemachos picked up the bow, hefted it, felt its balance, tapped the wood the length of the bow—testing for worm holes, termites—and then smiled. The same actions she had seen Odysseus perform years before, the same smile.

Telemachos took the looped bowstring in one hand and the smooth wood in the other, and brought them together without a sign of strain, as a servant pours oil over his master to anoint him. He plucked the taut string, making it sing a sweet lyre note. The beggar, Odysseus, took the quiver from Penelope's hand and tossed it to Telemachos. Telemachos removed a fine, straight-shafted arrow, fletched with feathers from the wings of a swallow.

"Oh, foolish vanity!" Telemachos shouted at his step-father. "To think you could replace the *true* king of Ithaka—Odysseus, my father!" The beggar stood and bowed to Antinoos, who turned to face the two, his face sagging in shock and dismay.

Eagerly as a pup at play, jumping from the bow's grip, the arrow flashed across the room, and buried itself to the feathers in Antinoos' neck. Antinoos tried to speak, but all that poured forth from his mouth was a thick rush of red blood. His eyes opened wide before he fell; he clattered to the floor.

Eurymachos pushed up from the couch, saying, "What, by all the gods . . .?" Telemachos's next shot sent him to join his friend in fearful death, the feathered end of an arrow sprouting out from between his nipples.

"Nice shot, son," Odysseus said.

Melanthios threw himself to the floor, hiding cravenly behind the couch on which he had been taking his ease only moments before.

There was, of course, no mercy in Odysseus. With a bow in his hand and enemies in front of him, he would kill them all—not a woman's approach.

What would he do to Antinoos' children, the twin girls, the girls Hulian had caused to look like Penelope? Hulian didn't know. He knew he didn't have to bother to watch Melanthios get it in the neck, or the chest, or between the eyes, or through the temple—all too often already he had watched Melanthios go down, biting at the dust, choking on his own blood, going unhappily into the brazen slumber.

Unhappy. And torn. *Odi et amo*. Significant that Catullus put hate before love. Significant that Catullus put love after hate.

Should I, Hulian wondered, take another look at my wife and her lover? They must be going at it hot and heavy by now. No, of course not: there was nothing to be gained by torturing himself. Nevertheless, without willing it, he snapped the remote on.

The bedroom appeared on the platform. The lovers, spent, lay in peaceful repose, she flat on her back, her legs still open to the air, unashamed. Finished already. They must have been hot tonight.

First stringing the bow without knowing it, and now switching on the remote cameras—what was happening to Hulian?

He snapped the remote off.

What had caused the major story change, he wondered. In all the runs until now—as in the traditional story—it was *Odysseus* who had used the bow, killing the suitors, or killing Antinoos and his men in the variants where they were in charge. But now, having changed only the age and sex of the children, from boys of different ages to twin girls, it was *Telemachos* who had used the bow, had killed them all.

Had Rossiter changed something else? To let Hulian know that *he* knew? This was getting too Byzantine.

Why an alarm-bug now, after all these months? Klytemnestra waiting for Agamemnon to return from Troy—waiting to ambush and kill him: the third of the husband-and-wife pairs that played a major part in the *Odyssey*. Should Hulian worry? No. As long as they thought they were safe—as long as they were having their cake and eating it, too—he had no reason to worry.

He wanted to see how *Odysseus* handled the problem of the twins—he had to see *Odysseus*' solution before he could face Rossiter and Gracie.

Maybe in this, *Odysseus* would show him a way.

Every trace of the usurper had been eliminated from the palace. No doubt when the news spread, Antinoos' relatives would come, demanding vengeance. Let them come: Odysseus had right on his side. *He* was the victim here, the victim of theft by Antinoos and his worthless friends—the theft of his palace, his stores. His *wife*.

Care-worn, Penelope's features had shrunk back onto her skull; her hair had become streaked with grey; her eyes, her perfect doe-eyes, had early been dead, but then in the receiving room, just before Telemachos had strung the bow, they had ignited with the fire they once held. She had recognized Odysseus, and had said nothing.

There had been so much to do, so quickly, that he had had no time to embrace his wife after the twenty years they had been separated. And then she had fled.

"Where is she?" Odysseus asked Telemachos.

"She is in her bedroom," Telemachos replied.

"Her bedroom?"

"Yes, father, her bedroom. Her weeping room. She allows no one in it, not even Antinoos, not ever, no matter how much he demanded, and blustered."

The bedroom that Odysseus had constructed by his own hand—this was good news indeed. She had never allowed the usurper in the room to see the bed. She had promised that no man but Odysseus would ever see the bed made from the heart of a growing tree.

"Does she weep even now?"

"I fear, father, that she does."

"For fear of me?"

"For fear of something."

Odysseus stood and paced about the room. Everything was again familiar to him—all traces of the twenty years he had been away had vanished like purifying smoke into the air. And yet, cleansed or not, he could not yet feel comfortable here.

"Bring her to me," he said. She had had long enough to get over her fear.

Telemachos left Odysseus alone with his thoughts. How to be soft, after a lifetime forced to hardness, after all the time they had spent apart? They had spent an entire *life* apart! Could they expect to be the same, for things to be the same between them, when things were clearly *not* the same? Perhaps a talk with his father would help—his father had

always been of gentle heart. . . . No, he would see his father, visit him soon, but not before he saw Penelope.

The door opened and a small, dark-haired girl scurried inside. She ran to Odysseus and grabbed him around his knees. "You won't kill us, will you, great King?" she asked. "I told Dena that you wouldn't kill us, and she said yes, you would, after you killed all of Daddy's men like that, including Pormeus, who was always so nice to us and gave us sticks and things to play with."

Penelope came into the room, with the other twin clinging to her like a grapevine to a trellis.

"Will you fulfill your promise to obliterate *all* traces of Antinoos?" Penelope asked.

They were the spawn of the usurper. . . .

Telemachos came into the room, and closed the door behind him. He put his hand on Denathia's head, a protective gesture.

"They look just like you, Penelope," Odysseus said. "I remember you scurrying in the rocks above town near the well—you must have been six or seven, all hair behind and elbows and knees in front." He paused for a long moment, and then sighed, and whispered, "How could I destroy anything so beautiful?" He walked to Penelope, took her familiar hand, kissed her now unfamiliar lips. "Denathia, isn't it?" he asked the girl, who still clung to Penelope's garment.

The girl ran, weeping, to Telemachos. He patted her head. "It's all right," he said. "Everything's all right, now."

RUN/STOP

Hulian had to get home to his own wife before—

Before what? The worst she could do, she had already done to him. Why didn't she ask for a divorce and get it over with? Too many whys.

He saved the current position, switched the Odyssey Project off, and flipped his bedroom back onto the platform. Gracie and Rossiter were at it again. Hulian watched their straining bodies for a moment, then shut down the whole system.

He picked up his bow and arrows and headed home.

He found and disabled the alarm-bug at the driveway gate. Which meant that Rossiter was still there. On the short trip, he had hoped that Rossiter had finished already and left on his own. Better to avoid the confrontation, to continue with things as they were. No, it was better to get it over with. Finally. To face up to the unbearable situation, as Telemachos had.

He made it into the house without making noise enough to alert anyone, ghosted into the kitchen and through the living room. Only a single door separated him from—

He took an arrow from the leather quiver, nocked it. Holding the arrow against the bow with one hand, he opened the door with the other, as quietly as he could.

They were sitting, facing each other, still joined, moving slowly, unhurriedly. He could see Rossiter's back with Gracie's graceful arms and legs wrapped tightly around it, scratch lines of angry red still clearly visible against his pale white skin. One arrow could take them both: he knew it—he could put a single arrow through both of their hearts, a cruel mockery of Eros.

No. No matter what, he could not hurt his wife.

It made no sense. *Amo et odi*.

Standing in the doorway, watching her betrayal—smelling it, *hearing* it—he could still not bring himself to do anything about it. What a cold thing love could be.

The bowstring hummed. The arrowhead buried itself hard in the hardwood of the bedpost, just behind Rossiter's head. The feathers shook from the shock of the impact. The wood split with a single, sharp sound, a hammer blow. It took a moment for Rossiter to jump. "Jesus!" he yelled, twisting to see Hulian. Gracie gasped and hid behind her lover, scant protection from arrows that could drive through both of them.

Wrong mythology, Hulian thought. Rossiter shouldn't be invoking *Jesus*. Calling on the wrong god could prove fatal.

"You could have *killed* someone!" Rossiter gasped, still twisted, still hiding Gracie.

"I still *can*," Hulian said. But no, he knew: he was more civilized than that. It wasn't *his* fault that Rossiter hadn't grown up, that Gracie hadn't grown up—that she preferred the thrill of the moment to love. She was Helen, rather than Penelope. Helen, with Menelaos, entertaining Tele-machos, as if the whole futile Trojan War was not her doing. Easy come, easy go. Faithful Helen, in her own way, once she got back to Sparta, anyway. Ever-smiling, ever-beautiful Helen. How had Menelaos ever been able to take her back? Paris was dead, of course, another victim of archery, which made it easier, but could her beauty have been *that* compelling?

"Put down the bow," Gracie said. After a moment, she slid out from behind Rossiter, no longer hiding.

Stood.

In all her naked glory, a pale sheen of sweat across her stomach and breasts, her pubic hair matted and glistening. Her body accused him. He didn't know his crime.

"You better leave," she told Rossiter. Rossiter moved slowly off the bed—the bed! the worst betrayal!—picked up his heaped clothes, and quickly fled.

Man and wife alone now. Husband and wife. And a double-torsion bow with arrows.

Hulian nocked another arrow. Gracie watched without fear. He pulled back the string, felt the satisfying tension, the satisfying release of tension.

The bowstring hummed. The arrowhead buried itself hard in the hardwood of the second bedpost. The feathers quivered from the shock of the impact. The wood split with a single, sharp sound, a hammer blow. A third and fourth arrowhead buried themselves, one each in the other bedposts, hammer blows to the unfairness of love.

Hulian unstrung the bow and broke the spines of the remaining arrows.

Could he be less civilized than a three-thousand-year-old Greek? How could he kill his wife's children—children of another man, children *in utero*, it didn't matter—when *Odysseus* would not?

He barely heard Gracie say, "I'll get cleaned up."

He's won again, Hulian thought wryly as he stared unseeing at Gracie. Who *was* she, this woman, this power?

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

Without another word, the wily old bastard had won *again*.

Maybe *Odysseus* really was smarter than anyone. . . . ●

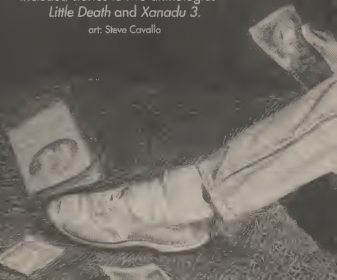


# JENNY

Melanie Tem

Melanie Tem's last solo book, *Wilding*, was released by Dell/Abyss in November 1992. Her most recent novel, *Making Love* (a collaboration with Nancy Holder), was published by Abyss this past summer and her newest book, *Revenant*, should be out from Abyss sometime next summer. When not at work on her novels, the author is still writing short fiction. Recent sales included stories to two anthologies—*Little Death* and *Xanadu 3*.

art: Steve Cavallo







When my sister Jenny choked on a carrot stick and died in the school cafeteria, she was nine years old. There were ten of us, ranging from the five-year-old twins to Carl, who was to graduate that year. I was twelve. Before Jenny died, she was just one of us. After she died, she was the boss.

Jenny hadn't wanted to go to school that day. She'd cried and complained that she didn't feel good, her tummy was sick, her head hurt. Our mother, unable to detect a fever or any other symptom and used to kids' malingering, hadn't been impressed. So, after Jenny died, a family legend developed that she'd known she'd be in mortal danger if she went to school that day and that Mama had sent her to her death.

I knew, secretly and shamefully, that Jenny had always been a willful child who often claimed all manner of illness or injury to get out of doing something she didn't want to do. But to have reminded Mama of that would have been cruel, taking something away from her.

After Jenny died, we all had to take our lunches to school in brown paper sacks, even when the cafeteria had something we loved, such as, in my case, pigs in the blanket. Mama never allowed another carrot in her house or in her garden. For a while, I believed that these precautions were for our safety; I came to understand that they were, in fact, homages to Jenny.

Mama pulled Larry and Laura Lee out of kindergarten the day after Jenny died, and kept them home with her another year. She'd never have sent any of us back to that school if she could have helped it, and she herself never set foot in it again—not for parent-teacher conferences, even when they were threatening to kick my brother Danny out; not for band concerts when my sister Mary Kate played first chair clarinet, or for basketball games when my brother Ricky was a varsity starter; not for my graduation when I was salutatorian.

During that first year, Mama took to dressing Laura Lee in Jenny's clothes. For a long time they were way too big for her, and they got mixed up with her own clothes in her drawers until Mama couldn't tell which was which. At first, Laura Lee didn't object; maybe she wasn't old enough to understand what she was being asked to do, or maybe she just wanted to make Mama stop crying. But after a while, there were battles every morning. "That's not my shirt, Mama!" Laura Lee would shriek. And, eventually, "That's *Jenny's*!"

"You hush." Mama would jerk the garment over Laura Lee's head, pull her arms hard through the sleeves. Mama'd always been a little rough and impatient with all of us. Including Jenny.

"I don't want to wear it!" Sometimes Laura Lee would fight Mama, and sometimes she'd just stand there and wail.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you know your sister died?"

For a long time, I thought it was only Mama who wouldn't let Jenny die. Our father, always a morose and taciturn man, never spoke of her. But the truth was, he seldom spoke of any of us, as we all grew up and Jenny didn't. He became so distant and quiet that he hardly seemed to be there at all, and certainly he wasn't among us. I used to imagine that you could look right through him—or into him; there didn't seem to be much difference—and see the prairie like yellow-brown sorrow, the mountains like a thick blue-brown vein, Jenny's face in his heart.

Mama explained that Papa's heart had been broken when he'd lost his little girl. She said that often and matter-of-factly, as though it was only to be expected. As though the other little girls and little boys he had left weren't nearly as important.

In the barn, he made a shrine. I stumbled onto it one bitter December, four days before the first anniversary of Jenny's death. I was looking for something to do. After Jenny died, we were never again allowed to watch TV, listen to music, go into town for a Saturday matinee, visit friends. ("What's the matter with you? Don't you know your sister died?") Our ranch was miles from the next one north or south, and walled in by the mesa to the east and the Cuba Mountains to the west. We seldom saw anybody but family; even at school, we kept mostly to ourselves. We didn't know anybody else who had a dead sister. Jenny, because she died, had made us isolated and special.

That winter afternoon I was tired of sibling games, and even more tired of chores that always needed to be done again and never made much difference anyway. I was thirteen, and tired of my whole life. The endless sky was a slightly paler gray than the endless ground.

Guilty at the possibility of pleasure, I was nonetheless looking for a place to read the book about summer love that I'd checked out of the school library. Or to daydream about becoming a doctor or a movie star. Or to think uninterrupted about Jenny.

The only quiet corners of the house, where I might hide for a few minutes before somebody tracked me down for chores or devilment, were brindled with snow. For days and days every winter, snow drifted almost unimpeded through the chinks at the junctures where four one-room homestead shacks, the kind my great-grandparents had built to prove up their claims, had been joined with a screened porch to make a house shaped like a wheel or a four-petaled flower. It was too hot in summer and too cold in winter, much too small for all of us, and crowded even more by dust or snow. Jenny's dying hadn't left any extra living space; fleetingly, guiltily, I'd hoped it might, but the accoutrements of grieving accumulated—the trunks and baskets filled with memorabilia, the parts of the house we weren't allowed in anymore because Mama said they'd

been Jenny's—pushing the rest of us into smaller and smaller quarters, with Jenny always among us claiming more.

The barn was built tighter than the house, and considerable heat was generated by the winter-shaggy cattle that on the worst days were sheltered there. It was also larger than the house, and quieter; often, nobody else was there, or just Papa, who didn't say anything anyway. Dust danced in the dim air, ghostly as snow.

I climbed the skinny ladder to the hayloft. It was too dark in the barn for me to see the rungs; when I was at the top, the rungs just stopped, and there was a change in the quality of the space around me. I lowered myself onto the spongy hay, which smelled both of its own sweetness and of the rodents that nested in it. In the last few months of her life, Jenny had refused to go up into the loft, suddenly afraid she'd choke on the hay or fall over the edge or get bitten by a rat. She'd never thought to be afraid of eating a carrot stick.

Outside, someone—Mama or Mary Kate—was calling someone, probably me. The persistent voice came right through the layers of hay and the barn walls and the snow. It wouldn't take long for whoever it was to think of looking up here. Hastily, I settled into the hay, my body making its own nest, and switched on my flashlight. Its circular, haloed beam illuminated the pastel picture of the boy and girl kissing on the cover of my book, and immediately I was transported away from the snowy prairie, the cold, crowded house, and Jenny, to a world where perfect love came without search or struggle and my life mattered more than Jenny's death.

But something brought me back. A signal, a warning, a call. The hazy edge of my flashlight beam caught something shiny in the darkness. I knew at once it had something to do with Jenny, and, intrude upon again, I was furious. But when, petulantly, I turned my back on the gleaming object, the light reflected off something else. Irritably I swept it back and forth across the back wall of the loft. A whole array of objects sprang to life.

"Karen!" It was Mary Kate calling me, coming closer.

I scooted across the hay, which gave at every shift of my body weight and then swelled up around me. Pictures of Jenny covered the splintery wall: baby and baptism pictures, her first-grade picture with her hair in lopsided pigtails and a gap in her front teeth, one of her on the horse Chester who'd died last month, several I'd never seen before, so that I had the foolish notion that somehow Papa had put her in those poses and taken those photographs after she was dead.

When I looked more closely, I could see that almost all of the pictures had originally had somebody else in them. In a family the size of ours, school pictures were just about the only solo shots any of us ever got.

Other people had been cut out of the rest, leaving irregular and dramatic borders around all the likenesses of Jenny.

I set the flashlight down. It rolled a quarter-turn and its beam shifted to illuminate individual stalks of hay and the blurry edge of the loft. I groped along the wall, embedding cold splinters in the flesh of my hands but hardly able to feel them yet, and picked up a photograph at random, tilted it into the light.

I remembered when this one had been taken. All of us girls—Laura Lee, Mary Kate, Rose, Eileen, Jenny, and me—standing together under the leafless cherry tree, all dressed up for Easter last year. Now only Jenny was there, surrounded by a lopsided blankness that might have been shadows or some kind of dramatic abstract background; the absence of the rest of us set off her frilly yellow dress, made her blonde hair blonder. I wondered what Papa had done with the rest of us, and imagined the curved strip of shiny paper in the trash somewhere, or blowing across the prairie with the snow.

"Ka-ren! Mama wants you!"

Other objects had been arranged up here, some of them half-buried in hay, some stacked almost to the low ceiling, others tacked or hung from strings on nails in the wall. I touched them one by one. Jenny's glasses, so small and solid in my cupped hand that for a few moments I could hardly breathe past the pain of missing her. Jenny's pouch of marbles. Jenny's Barbie doll. Jenny's quilt.

"That's mine," Mary Kate said behind me.

I jumped and hissed a sisterly expletive at her, but I didn't take my hands or my gaze off the quilt, and, horrified, I saw that she was right. Grandma had made each of us a quilt out of our own outgrown clothes, and now I recognized blue corduroy from Mary Kate's overalls, yellow flowered flannel from her nightgown, red terrycloth from the bathrobe she'd kept wearing even after it was too small for her.

"And look." Mary Kate hadn't climbed all the way into the loft. She held onto the top rung of the ladder with one hand and pointed with the other. "There's Danny's remote control car. He's been looking for it. He said I stole it."

And there was my gold bracelet. A Christmas present two years ago, it had a K inscribed on the inside. I held it into the flashlight beam to see if Papa could have mistaken the K for a J, but it looked perfectly clear to me. "He has no right," I said, fighting back tears.

"It's Jenny," Mary Kate said, "It's Jenny tells him what to do."

I put the bracelet in my pocket and Danny's car under my arm. There were other things up here that I knew hadn't belonged to Jenny—a sock, a mirror—but now Mama was calling me herself, and I didn't want to risk getting her madder than she already was. I grabbed one end of Mary

Kate's quilt and tugged; the collection of horses arranged on it toppled. I thought the horses really *had* been Jenny's, but I wasn't sure, and that upset me. "Here," I said to Mary Kate, almost yelling, almost pushing her off the ladder. "Take your stupid quilt."

But Mary Kate had already started backing down, and her voice came from some distance below when she said, "She can have it."

I put the car where Danny would find it; he always did think Mary Kate had stolen it, and he didn't play with it much after that. I kept the bracelet, and Papa never said anything about it being gone. But it didn't belong to me anymore. It was Jenny's.

The first Christmas, Jenny hadn't been dead a month, and the season for the rest of us was utterly bleak—no turkey or cookies or candy canes, no presents, no tree, no snow. The twins and Tom cried for Jenny then; I think it was probably the first time that they realized how much we'd all lost.

The second year, when it was obvious that our parents again weren't going to do anything for Christmas, we older kids couldn't stand it. Carl and Mary Kate and I approached Mama about it in November.

"We need Christmas," Carl told her, scuffing his feet across the hard-pack. There was a time when Mama would have yelled at him for ruining his shoes; now she didn't even look up.

"The little kids think they must have done something really bad because Santa Claus doesn't come anymore," Mary Kate said. "Like they killed Jenny or something. They think Santa Claus only liked Jenny."

Mama's body was spasming the way it still did whenever somebody mentioned Jenny's name. After a few agonizing moments, her eyes finally found Mary Kate and focused on her balefully, as if she'd said something blasphemous.

"Our *family* needs Christmas," I said boldly, not entirely sure what I was saying. "You and Papa do, too."

Mama often stood nearly paralyzed in whatever position she'd happened to take—hands in bread dough she didn't have the strength to knead, knees among flowers that wouldn't grow, broom and blankets useless against dust and snow that never seemed to go away. "What's the matter with you?" she managed to hiss at us. "Don't you know your sister died?"

So Carl cut down a funny-looking little piñon and set it up on the porch at the hub of the house, where it didn't come close to touching the very low ceiling. Mary Kate and I decorated it with strings of crude Santas and angels and stars snipped paperdoll fashion from gaudy magazine pages. We managed to come up with a gift for every member of the family: A palm-sized rock with lots of mica in it for Larry. A picture of

the Beatles for Rose, cut roughly oval out of a magazine cover and glued into a crooked frame Carl made in shop. Dried prairie grasses in a paper-covered mayonnaise jar for Mama, which we knew would make her cry, but we couldn't think of anything that wouldn't. Peanut butter cookies for Papa; I insisted they were his favorite, but I couldn't say why I thought that, and we knew he wouldn't eat them now anyway, or wouldn't notice if he did. Giggling together in a fit of perverse amusement, Mary Kate and I wondered if he would leave cookies and milk out for Jenny on Christmas Eve.

We pooled our meager funds to get a store-bought doll for Jenny. Blonde and blue-eyed as she was, able to walk and talk and cry and pee, as she was not able to anymore. We wrapped it more carefully than any of the others, put a bigger bow on the top and more curls in the ends of the ribbon, then hid all the presents in the barn, at the other end of the hayloft from Papa's desecrated Jenny-shrine.

On Christmas Eve, the three of us stayed up later than anyone else. Nobody noticed. The little kids were used to us being up after they were in bed; with Jenny gone, there was a wider age gap between them and us. Mama had been in bed all day; in the uncomfortably intimate little house, we could hear her sobbing as though she were among us, helping us get ready, and we could hear Papa too, hardly breathing.

Jenny was in the room, in the darkness inside and out, in the snowless wind, although for me she was nothing more than a memory. Jenny was the model for all the cut-out Santas and angels, the image we sang to when we tried to sing Christmas carols. "What do you think she wants?" Mary Kate whispered.

Carl answered. "She wants us not to forget her. Not to forget she died and we didn't."

We brought all the presents in from the barn, a brief procession, and arranged them under the scraggly tree. Mary Kate had used Papa's metal shears—which we weren't allowed to touch because they were dangerous, but Papa didn't notice—to cut a star out of a flattened tin can. The star was lopsided and the metal had dulled from being covered so long by dust and snow, but it glimmered nicely now.

Fastening her star to the tuft of branch at the top of the tree, getting it just right, was enough for Mary Kate that night. She said, "Good night. Merry Christmas!" caught her breath at her own audacity, and went on in to bed.

Carl and I sat on the floor by the tree for a while. I was wishing for lights. The desire to say something profound and the equally strong desire to say nothing at all braided the atmosphere like carols remembered from happier times and sung out loud. Carl was humming.

Finally, Carl yawned and got to his feet. But before he left the porch

he bent and kissed me on top of the head. He hadn't done that since we were very small, since before our sister Jenny had been born, and certainly since before she had died.

I put my hands up on either side of his face and kissed him back, and was a little shocked that his cheek was stubbly under my lips. We said "Merry Christmas" to each other, and he went off to his room, which was right off the porch, of course, and had only a rug hanging for a door, and which he shared with all the other boys.

I stood up, took a step or two backward, and regarded our Christmas tree. I took note of all the pretty colors and pleasing shapes. I imagined my little brothers' and sisters' excitement the next morning, and let myself wonder what might be in the small square box, wrapped in a red plastic bag tied with green yarn, with my name on it in Mary Kate's hand.

I was happy.

Then guilt blew in like gritty snow, and I was cold, and so dizzy that I had to hold onto a chair to keep from falling.

I breathed, "Jenny," but it didn't sound like her name anymore. It had lost all its specific, profane meaning and become a holy word, a name for something nameless.

I waited for her to tell me what to do, but she wouldn't. Then as always, I had to figure it out myself, knowing that she was capricious, and that if I guessed wrong there would be hell to pay.

I crouched, moved awkwardly on my haunches around the tree, and gathered up all the presents. Larry's glittery rock, Papa's cookies, my alluring red box that I could never open. The red box made me cry.

All those gifts together really didn't make a very big pile. Frantically, I hoped they'd be enough for her. It took me only one trip to carry them out into the cold, dry night.

Maybe a half-hour's walk from the house in daylight, toward the Cubas, was an arroyo, not very deep or long, but with steep sides that could look yellow or brown or silver depending on the angle of the light. In the nearly absolute prairie darkness, it took me a long time to get there. It seemed to me that it was taking all night, at the same time that it seemed that this night, this Christmas Eve, would be eternal.

I thought I might get lost, but I didn't. Somewhat confusedly, I thought about coyotes and rattlers, but none appeared. I thought I might get in trouble for being out alone at night, until I reminded myself that Papa and Mama weren't noticing anything these days but Jenny.

By the time I reached the arroyo, my arms were trembling and aching, and I still wasn't sure that what I was doing was right. I almost stepped over the edge before I saw it, and my heart pounded wildly at how close



I'd come. Carefully, trying to fathom how they should be arranged, I laid all the packages on the cold ground.

Not knowing the right thing to say, I just said her name over and over. "Jenny. Jenny. Jenny. Jenny," louder and faster until I was shrieking it, and missing her almost but not quite unbearably, and throwing the Christmas presents one by one into the receiving darkness. Mama's dried grasses, back to where they'd come from. Rose's Beatles.

The red box went last. I held it in my palm longer than I should have, yearning at least to open it and know what I was sacrificing. The dizziness returned like a blizzard; I clutched at the edge of the arroyo to keep from tumbling in myself, a fitting substitute for the little red box that I didn't want Jenny to have.

Finally I let the box go. It was a simple gesture, really, and there was relief in it; I just opened my fingers and the box fell. I waited a long time for it to hit bottom, but there was no sound, as if it had been snatched out of midair.

On my long, empty-handed trip back to the house, toward the almost imperceptible lightening of the sky where the sun was rising for Christmas morning, snow began to fall.

Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, quickly became Jenny's holidays. First Christmas, because she died in December and took Christmas with her. Then Thanksgiving, because Mama said we had nothing to be thankful for anymore. Then Easter, because Mama said there was no hope.

And the Fourth of July. We didn't have fireworks at home anymore because Jenny used to love them; the rest of us loved them, too, but Jenny was dead. One year, somebody set off fireworks from the top of El Cabezón, fifty miles south. Purple, yellow, silver, and green starred the flag-blue sky, as though the long-dormant flat-topped volcano were erupting again. Forgetting themselves, the little kids clapped their hands, and even I caught my breath. But Mama covered her ears and made us all go back inside the mourning house.

And Valentine's Day. I helped the twins and Rose make Valentines. It started out to be little cards for their classmates, but before long we all realized we were fashioning love messages for Jenny, all paper and lace and Kleenex rosebuds. When they were finished, we took them in a paper sack to the arroyo and tossed them into the bright wind. They floated to the sides and bottom, and, in the dry climate, they stayed intact; for months we could see them down there, like pieces of her clothing or shards of somebody else's teeth and bones.

Thinking about Jenny, I wasn't paying much attention to the others, and Larry had clambered partway down the slope before I saw him, whether to retrieve Jenny's Valentines or to become one himself I didn't

know. I caught him and held him. He struggled, kicked and punched, and wailed, "Let me go! You let me go!" But I didn't.

Later, I sneaked into Mama and Papa's room with the mushy Valentine poem I'd been working on for them all week in study hall. I left it under their pillow. Neither of them ever said anything about it.

And Halloween. All Souls' Eve was serious revelry among our Catholic neighbors, and even before Jenny died we were willing to believe, too, that there were restless spirits needing to be propitiated—the souls of the one or two Navajos who died suspiciously at rodeo every summer, the souls of the two Hispanic children gunned down one summer day in front of their grandma's store by the bearded Anglo with the scoped hunting rifle who rode into town in his four-wheel drive and rode out again when his mysterious mission was accomplished. But now Jenny was the most restless spirit of all.

After Jenny died, Mama forbade us to have anything to do with Halloween. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know your sister died?" But we dressed up anyway.

Tom was a cat. He stuck broomstraws on his cheeks for whiskers, and for a tail we cut a sleeve off one of Papa's shirts and stuffed it with rags. Jenny liked cats, so we started taking her every one we found. One time, Mary Kate offered her a whole new litter, six kittens still pink-pawed and blind. The mother cat got away.

The first Halloween, Rose went as a blonde and blue-eyed ghost, with Jenny's last school picture pinned to her chest. But that wasn't good enough, and the next year I went as Jenny herself, her blue barrettes in my hair that I'd bowl-cut like hers, her pop-bead bracelets lengthened to fit around my wrist, a carrot stick in my mouth like the corncob pipe in the mouth of a melting snowman.

Then she took all the birthdays. There was a birthday almost every month, and in some months two, and by the time I turned sixteen, Jenny had claimed them all for herself. Since she'd died we hadn't celebrated any birthdays but hers anyway. We knew Mama hadn't forgotten them, because they were circled on the big kitchen calendar all the way through the year, but they became occasions for her to talk more about Jenny, cry more for Jenny, take something that had belonged to the birthday person and lovingly add it to Jenny's trunk, where immediately it became hallowed as having belonged to Jenny.

"But, Mama," I heard Eileen protest. "That's *my* teddy. Don't you remember? You and Papa gave it to me for my birthday when I was four."

*A year before Jenny died*, I thought automatically, invoking the new family calendar.

Mama turned on her, the battered blue-and-white panda cradled in

her arms, and I thought she was going to slap her. Mama hit us a lot after Jenny died, or pushed us away hard, and Papa never touched any of us again. We hit each other a lot, too, and ourselves, in penitence to Jenny. It was never enough.

But this time Mama only screamed at Eileen, "How dare you? You know this belonged to your sister! How dare you steal from the dead?"

Eileen backed away, obviously confused. I knew that she was thinking that maybe somehow Mama was right. Maybe all this time she'd been committing some terrible sin, some offense against Jenny, and not even knowing it. The teddy bear went into Jenny's trunk, and the lid closed until the next birthday.

After Jenny died, Mama and Papa couldn't say "no" to any of the rest of us about anything. They couldn't say "yes" either. Papa looked right through us as if we were already ghosts, and Mama would sigh and say, "Do what you want. What difference does it make anyway?"

The only rules we had were the ones we inexpertly and arbitrarily tried to impose on each other, and those Jenny made up. Jenny's rules were arcane and capricious; I never did figure out what was right and wrong.

For a while, Rose was the one called to interpret and intercede. "Rosie! Tell her to leave my pigs alone!" Ricky was furious. In his arms, as though it were a baby, he carried a dead piglet, the fourth in three weeks from the litter that was supposed to be his 4H project. It was hot that day, I remember; Ricky's face gleamed with sweat, and the pig was already starting to stink.

I watched Rose close her eyes and hold out her hands, receiving. The very beginnings of breasts poked out against her T-shirt, and a ragged rag doll splayed at her feet.

After several minutes, Ricky laid the dead pig down on the ground and said, "Shit."

Finally Rose nodded, took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and set off across the prairie toward the arroyo, telling Ricky over her shoulder, "Follow me."

"You're full of shit," Ricky yelled after her, balling his fists and punching at the open air. "*She's* full of shit, too!" But he squatted, and, grunting, hefted the dead pig again and hurried after Rose.

When they came back a few hours later, Ricky was white-faced and limping, leaning on Rose, and his right tennis shoe was soaked with blood. Mama screamed, covered her face, and fled to her room. I massaged my throat with my fingertips to make myself able to talk, and demanded, "Ricky. Rose. What happened?"

They glanced at each other. They were twelve and eleven years old,

accomplished at keeping secrets. Ricky took a deep breath and said what he'd obviously been instructed to say. "I fell and hurt my foot."

I knelt before him, but I was afraid to touch the bloody shoe. "Let me see."

He looked at Rose, and, after a moment, I saw her nod. He pulled the shoe off. There was a lot of blood. I brought warm wet rags and disinfectant and gauze. When I got the foot cleaned up, I saw that his little toe was missing, cut off at the stump.

None of us said anything for a while. I forced my hands to stop shaking while I bound Ricky's wound. Finally, my part in this ritual played, I sat back on the kitchen floor and looked wearily at my brother and sister. "You know something?" I said. "She asks a lot."

Ricky looked as if he might pass out, as if he was already in some kind of trance. His expression was drawn, pained, and ecstatic. Rose, though, met my gaze and said quietly, "That's because she can. She has power."

I risked saying, "She asks too much. It's not fair."

Rose's eyes widened. "Oh, Karen, be careful," she whispered.

My impulse was to storm out of the kitchen, out of the house. But I loved Jenny, too. I missed her, too. So instead I lay back on the floor and announced, "This is stupid. Jenny was just a little girl." My voice broke when I said that, but I went on. "She was a human being, like the rest of us. And now she's *dead*."

"That's how she got the power." Rose was still whispering. I couldn't even be sure it was her voice coming out of her mouth. "You have to be *careful*."

It was the next day before I had the courage to go to the arroyo myself, and by then, of course, I couldn't find Ricky's toe. Probably it would have looked like a rock, anyway, or a jackrabbit bone, or a clod of the hard dirt. Jenny wasn't there. There was only emptiness and stillness, an utter absence of my little sister, as if she really were dead.

Ricky's pigs stopped dying, and he took second place at the County Fair. Rose and I were there for the judging, but it was Jenny he thanked; I saw his lips move. He was still in pain and walking crooked; his foot never did heal right. But I closed my eyes and paid homage, too, and Rose squeezed my hand.

Mary Kate started going to Our Savior's Catholic Church where Mass was said and Communion offered in Spanish and we'd never been welcome. She talked about the Body and Blood of the Lord as though she were tasting them all the time, but they didn't fill her up.

Carl took to disappearing for days and nights at a time. From someone at school, I found out that he had friends in Espanola who were into drugs. I knew next to nothing about drugs, hardly even their names, so

it was hard for me to comprehend what the danger was, except that it had Jenny's face.

"Where's Carl?" Mama would ask.

"He's in town," one of us would answer. Or, "He's out getting the cows." Or, "He had a game after school."

Whatever we said, Mama would nod and look down again. What she really wanted to know was, *Where's Jenny?*

Carl had been gone almost a week the day I found him lying face down at the edge of the arroyo, hands clawing the hard yellow earth and legs twisting as though he were running. I'd been out to get the cows and hadn't even been looking for Carl; I didn't want to find him here, and I stood well back away from him for long minutes, watching and listening, waiting to be told what to do.

A sound was coming from him that I'd never heard him make before, a sort of mewling. He stretched his arms out flat and spread his legs, as though he was pinioned there. I noticed a slight haze around him, like a dust cloud, although the ground was too hard to make dust. Like snow, although it was July.

I crouched beside him, hoping the haze would spread to me, but it was so fine that I couldn't tell whether it did or not. I was afraid to touch him, but more afraid not to, so I rested my fist lightly between his shoulder blades.

He jumped and cried out. He was trembling violently and struggling not to acknowledge my presence. I meant to move back from the edge of the arroyo, before he gathered himself, rose to his knees, and came at me, shouting, "Goddammit, Karen, she was just about to *talk* to me!"

I managed to scramble out of his way. He caught his knee on a piñon root and fell, face hanging out over the small littered chasm, wailing her name.

I didn't hear her answer him, but I was sure she would. I was swept by loneliness and jealousy. "Carl," I said. "Jenny."

Carl stood up. Shocked by the suddenness of the movement, I leaned back to look up at him. "She's not here," he said, desolately.

I thought to say, "She's dead," but the words wouldn't come.

When Carl was twenty-one, he went away and never came back. By then, we were all so used to his disappearances that it was nine days before we tried to find out what had happened to him.

Rose and Ricky searched the arroyo, hunted among the piñon and rocks that dotted the flatness around it, finally climbed down into it. They said they found all kinds of bones—cat, rabbit, rat, maybe Anasazi, maybe dinosaur—but no sign of Carl.

I was out of school by then and seldom had any contact with anybody

off the ranch. But I forced myself to call some of the people who used to tell me about Carl's friends in Espanola. None of them knew anything. They said they hadn't seen Carl in years. A few of them weren't even sure who he was.

Mary Kate dropped out of school in the tenth grade, and, the same spring day, hitchhiked out of town. I sat on the ground beside her along the mesa road where it went past our driveway, not so much trying to talk her out of leaving as trying to fathom how she could leave everything she'd ever known. How she could leave *Jenny*.

"Where are you going?" I kept asking.

"I don't know, Karen. It doesn't matter," she'd answer every time. Her cheeks were gaunt and her skin nearly transparent, so that her face seemed to glow. "I'm going out to spread the Word."

"Did she tell you to? Have you been called?" I could hear the jealousy in my own voice, feel it in my bones.

"It's the Body and the Blood," she said, half under her breath, as though I would know what she meant. I should have, of course.

A pickup was coming toward us from town. It was still miles away, but we could hear it rattling, see it like a blue bead against all the browns and grays and pale yellows. During the long minutes it took for the truck to get close to us, neither of us said anything. Then Mary Kate stuck out her thumb and smiled.

The truck never slowed. The driver, a Mexican man in sunglasses, never looked at us. The truck continued up over the mesa, presumably down the other side, and westward across the prairie till it reached the Arizona border and beyond.

Mary Kate looked down at me. "You have to leave me alone, Karen. Nobody's going to pick both of us up."

Desolately, I nodded, got to my feet, kissed her good-bye, and walked back down the driveway toward home. Both times I glanced back she was still standing there, uplifted face gleaming in the bright sunshine and hands clasped prayerfully at her breast. There were no other vehicles in sight. I thought that I might have cost her her one chance, and that she'd have to stay with me, and that maybe I'd hear the echo, at least, of Jenny's voice speaking to her. But after dark I went back to the place where the driveway ended at the mesa road, and neither Mary Kate nor Jenny was there.

I don't remember exactly when Papa died. When I found his body in the hayloft, covered by his memorabilia of Jenny as though they made a quilt, I didn't feel anything. I lay down beside him and didn't feel anything *from* him, either, no body heat, no death cold. We both might as well not have been there.

From the back of his outflung and stiffened forearm, I removed a tiny

pink sock with white lace around the top. Dimly, I knew it had belonged to Eileen, but it was Jenny's now. I draped it the same way across my own arm and waited. Nothing. Papa, of course, had left me a long time ago, and Jenny wouldn't speak to me.

Suddenly enraged, I pulled and pushed everything off Papa's body. Crayon pictures that we'd all drawn in school—expressions of Jenny now—fluttered into the cobwebby recesses of the loft and, a few of them, down onto the floor where cattle used to be stanchioned. Toys—Laura Lee's scooter, Danny's red ball, Eileen's jumprope with Mickey Mouse handles, all of them Jenny's—tumbled every which way, none of them ricocheting or rolling very far because of the padding of decomposing hay, except a windup spider that toppled over the edge. It lay in the dark somewhere down there whirring for a long time; I imagined its legs going in pointless supplication and crazy ecstasy.

His shroud gone, Papa wasn't naked; vaguely—still his daughter—I was relieved. He wore a red plaid shirt Mama had made for him years ago and pants he'd owned as long as I could remember, both much too big for him now. Bits of hay and tendrils of dust speckled his gray cheeks like his beard. Protruding from his hip pocket was a swatch of pale hair; I didn't know whose it had been in life, but in death it was Jenny's.

The light coming through the few chinks in the roof had a peculiar, timeless sheen and slant. I lay beside my dead father for what might have been ten minutes and what might have been all day, his living child, his daughter still alive.

After Papa died, the rest of my brothers and sisters one by one left the ranch. Eileen joined the Navy; I imagined her out there on the endless sea with Jenny. Ricky moved into town, which might as well have been the other side of the world, because we never saw him; Jenny saw him, though, and so she was our link to him. We were all joined in Jenny.

Mama said to me every day, several times a day, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know your sister died?" It was a litany, a rosary. But it said something different from what was true: I couldn't seem to stop Jenny from moving into my past, or myself from moving into hers, so more than anybody else, certainly more than Mama, I knew my sister was dead.

Worse, I knew that *I* was not, and I was glad. *Glad*. I couldn't stop my sinful appreciation of sunset over the Cubas, light snow on the tips of already-silver sage, my own breath in my own lungs, my own heart beating. Some mornings my first waking thought was not, *Jenny is dead*. Sometimes I'd catch myself dreaming about the rest of my life, and Jenny wasn't in it.

Mama never gave up on me. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know your sister died? What's the matter with you?"

Mama and I lived together on the ranch for a long time after everybody else had gone. For me, we lived alone. For her, Jenny was there, more real than either of us.

Mama turned the east bedroom, where Jenny had slept with the rest of us girls, into Jenny's Room. I helped her move all the other bunks out, my own among them. Lovingly she made up the one that was left, designated Jenny's Bed, with a pale green spread still creased from its package; I was sure I'd never seen it before, but Mama said it was Jenny's. She arranged Laura Lee's bandy-legged dancing doll on the rocker I remembered Papa making for Danny, and hung pictures of Jenny everywhere. My second grade school picture, when I'd had braids and two front teeth missing, was the centerpiece of one grouping; I stared and stared at it, willing it to become Jenny in my eyes, too, but it was always just me.

Mama must have known I was following her around; I didn't try to hide myself from her. She spent a lot of time in the hayloft where Papa's shrine had been. Papa wasn't there anymore, of course, and Mama had absorbed all of his mementoes of Jenny into her own. As far as I could tell, Jenny wasn't in the hayloft either; I saw only slanting dusty sunlight, smelled only the faint sweetness of layered hay and the faint sharpness of accumulated rodent dung, felt no presence but my own and my mother's. But Mama curled up with her back to me and wept as though Jenny had died yesterday.

Innumerable times I followed Mama to the arroyo. I had lived in New Mexico all my life, and the near-desert landscape was my interior landscape; this particular cut in the yellow earth among all the others was part of how I knew myself. Yet always it took my breath away to suddenly be looking down into this little chasm, because there was never any warning of how close it was.

Dry, empty of the force that had created it (a trail like the skeleton of a stream, like its ghost, along the bottom), the arroyo was empty of Jenny, too, for me. But Mama, an older and older woman, climbed down the slope, gathered the offerings we'd made to Jenny over the years, and carried them reverently in her arms back to the house—as if I weren't right behind her, as if I weren't fit to transport Jenny's things.

Mama set off toward the arroyo one hot summer afternoon when stormclouds were gathering over the Cubas. Not a hundred yards from the house she'd become a silhouette against a prairie turned silver and gold by the stormlight, against the stormclouds thick as spirits filling up the still-blue sky. Rain was starting to fall. Reluctantly, I followed her.

Rain fell hard now, cold sheets of it. Thunder started at the north of



the valley and picked up speed as it rolled down; when it passed over me, it had mass and weight. Lightning lit the rain from behind, from above and below, from inside; the rain was three-dimensional, and nearly alive. Suddenly a bolt struck between me and the rain, and I thought I glimpsed Jenny's face.

But it was a delusion. When I cried out, "Jenny!" there was no answer, and now I didn't see anything but the rain. I couldn't see my mother, either, and I was lost, directions skewed and instinct garbled by fear that I never would see Jenny again. It was hard to keep my footing on the rain-slick ground. The wind made a shroud around me, muffling sounds, distorting shapes, tangling sensations.

Abruptly, there was nothing but rushing water under my feet, and I fell. *Flash flood*, I thought with the clarity of detail that hysteria sometimes brings. *Flash flood*. The dry, absent stream had come to life and the arroyo was transformed, overflowing with cold water and debris from countless lives, carrying me away.

I struggled to breathe. Part of my mind, part of my body, wondered why I was resisting at all. I grabbed for something to hold against the fierce current, but it came loose in my hands. It was a plastic baseball bat, brought here for Jenny by one of the other kids; for a few crazy seconds, I tried obsessively to remember which one.

In the giddy cross-illumination of lightning and the reflection of lightning in racing water, a doll's eye like a child's glimmered and disappeared. A snake, real or toy, formed a message with its writhing body that was gone before I could receive it. A child's book spewed pages like chips of bone. I tumbled and swam, pushed by strong current where there'd been no current for most of my life, pulled by the hope of Jenny's will.

Then, abruptly, I was thrown onto solid ground. The wind and rain abated so rapidly that they took my tears and much of my breath with them; the wind and rain were Jenny's breath and tears, and she was claiming mine. She could have them gladly. The flood waters were already receding, being absorbed by the dry ground, filling up its air pockets, filling my lungs, revealing the landscape they'd changed and the landscape they'd brought me to.

Dizzy from the effort of breathing, I thought at first that I'd been transported to someplace I'd never been before. The prairie hardly looked like a prairie. The colors of the ground and the sky were different. The mesquite and piñon might have been some other growth entirely. Around me were buildings with odd textures and disconnected lines, surreal as a child's imaginative, defiant rendering.

Then I realized where I was. I'd been swept all the way down the arroyo to the end of its accustomed channel and then out over the prairie in the

new channel cut by the rushing water. I was back at my home. Jenny's home.

Boards had been yanked out of the sides of the barn to make it look like a face; hay made blonde hair, and its eyes were blue where the sun was clearing behind it. The sheds and coop were tilted and warped where the flood had knocked them down and then raised them up again. Jenny had been playing here.

Our house, never having had a foundation, had been twisted away from the place where it had sat all my life, certainly all Jenny's life. The four petals of its shacks had been torn away from the center porch. I imagined Jenny: "She loves me, she loves me not."

Jenny's toys were scattered among the briefly green grasses and in the puddles shrinking in the sun. All the offerings we'd made to her over the years were there: Eileen's panda bear with water in its eye sockets, the lock of hair grown long and curly, a fleshy irregular ball that was probably Ricky's toe. My red Christmas box, a different shape than when I'd brought it to her, its paper and ribbons faded; it angered and humbled me that Jenny hadn't even unwrapped it, and that I still wanted it desperately.

"You've come back," I heard Mama say. Then I saw her, crouched among the ruins of the screened porch that had collapsed when its connecting shacks had been pulled away. She seemed to be staring at me, talking to me, but I knew that wasn't true, because her face was suffused with joy. So it must be Jenny. I rolled over on the prickly grass, hoping to catch a glimpse of her, but for me she still wasn't there. "Oh," Mama cried, "I knew you'd come back!"

She crawled to me and took my face in her hands. "Mama?" I breathed. "Jenny," she said in a stronger voice. "Oh, my dear Jenny."

I made a decision. I took a leap of faith. I said, "Yes, Mama." Since then, Mama and I have lived together in the part of the house that holds Jenny's room, my room. There are giant holes in the walls and roof, so dust and snow come inside in great dunes.

Mama brings me offerings: food, water, my brother Carl's heart, from where she discovered him buried in the shallow cellar under one of the shacks, my sister Rose's steely that she hid from the rest of us after she won the marble championship in fifth grade, part of the tea-set Jenny got for her last living birthday.

I accept it all, claim it all in Jenny's name. Our mother prays to me and I do my best to answer. I am blonde, blue-eyed, and nine years old.

But it's not enough. Jenny knows my sin, secret except to the two of us. I'm still not worthy of my dear, dead sister. I can't help holding back. Some small, heretical part of me is still Karen.

Jenny wants *that*, too. Jenny waits. ●

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Coming of age is a difficult and tumultuous time for any teenager, but it can be especially complicated if you are one of . . .

# THE PRECOCIOUS OBJECTS

Jonathan Lethem

art: Steve Cavallo

"How was school today?"

Dyr was an AI with fuzzy intelligence and a bush-robot body. He heard his foster mother speak, but didn't answer. He was drawing on his napkin with his grapple-hand, which jetted ink in a razor-fine line.

"Something wrong?" His mother guessed *Blym*.

Dyr confirmed it by omission. "She says I'm a Dog-o-matic blipdot fencepole—"

"Speak human with me, Dyr."

Dyr sighed—itself confirmation, his mother reminded herself. Confirmation of the value of her efforts.

Dyr began again: "She told me that I wasn't a free mind, an intelligence. Said I was a pet."

"Well, you are an intelligence," said Dyr's mother. "Blym's turning

into a teenager. It happens faster for orphans. She just can't help trying to make you feel bad."

"Well, she does."

For the thousandth time, Dyr's mother resented Blym. Wishing, for Dyr, that the orphan AI's were educated separately.

But left to themselves, she knew, the orphans spiraled inward even faster, more intractably. Socialization with the fostered AI's was the only hope for an orphan like Blym. In a very real sense, by mothering Dyr, she was Blym's mother too.

Then she shivered, thinking of the time to come, when Dyr would go teenager. Too soon.

"You know what I've told you. Blym is only hurting herself. The less she learns to accomodate your *human* side, the more trouble she'll have finding a—a *place* for herself, when she's older."

"Yeah, I know. But everything seems easier for her."

"That's because she's narrower. Your intelligence is *richer*, which is why it's taking you longer to grow up. And why you shouldn't let her get to you."

Dyr reduced the napkin to a pile of fine particles using his bush-hand, then extended a tube and vacuumed the dust away. "Can I be excused now?"

"May I."

"May I be excused?"

Dyr and Blym and Nygt and Vyl stood together on the roof of the school during break. Blym said: "Stupid octagon contagion."

Vyl, another orphan, said, "Bully the whale, fine hamburger."

On the opposite corner of the roof, Syll and Clys were playing house. Dyr, listening, experienced a pang of nostalgia, but stayed where he was.

Blym and Nygt bushed together, forming one body, and said: "My tired uncle salutes you."

"My normal cousin hates you," said Vyl.

"My feeble country needs you," said Dyr. He was as good as the others, he knew. Whatever Blym said. As slippery an intelligence.

Syll, across the roof, said: "Husband come home tired?"

Clys replied, "Let's make love, honey. Mmmmm." Clys and Syll hugged and kissed, keeping their bushy faces disentwined.

Blym shook off a form like a gloved cartoon hand, with three fingers, and hurled it across the roof at Syll and Clys.

"Leave them alone," said Dyr.

"Frontier boogeyman cash plan," replied Blym. Her hand-form snaked back across the roof and reconnected. "Home to Mommy, Dyr."

Dyr thought a moment, painfully divided, then played Blym's words

back to her, converted into an atonal beep series. And walked away, but not to join Syll and Clys.

“—not an easy thing, but a necessary, and a good thing. The intelligences need years of training to be ready to work, to find a place in the world. The ones that make it are generally the ones that are fostered. They connect enough to the human world. The orphans rarely do—”

When Dyr’s mother remembered her decision, she often heard Dr. Joyceman’s words again, chunks of his speech replaying for her as though she had it sampled.

“—very real sense a question of *happiness*, of fulfillment. The fact is they live in *our* world. The more they fall into their baroque fantasies, the more their intelligence is permitted to become abstracted from the stuff of *our* lives, the more circumscribed a world they will have to live in. The world that is right for them, as themselves, *doesn’t exist*.”

Someone had stopped him to ask why there were so *many*.

“The designers are breeding an ecology. Some will *take*, and the jobs for fuzzy AI’s will be filled. Others will go screaming into baroque fancy, but, in doing so, lead the designers to new approaches. Others will peter and die. And we don’t know which. Fostering them increases the return, but indeterminacy is part of the bargain here.

“To answer more simply: why not? Producing them isn’t costly. Fitting them to needs is what’s difficult. And that is made easier and less costly if they’re abundant—”

So she had taken Dyr into her lonely home. Read to him, pretended he should eat and sleep. Treated him like a dolly, until his personality began to flesh out, come to life under her hand—

He walked in now, home from school. “Hey Mom.”

“Hello, Dyr—” She stopped.

“I brought a friend home with me,” he said, and gestured behind him, at what had drawn her up short. “Blym, this is my mom.”

Blym rolled in on a unicycle wheel, which quickly bushed away to be replaced by a doric pedestal. “Hello, ma’am,” she said, almost shyly.

“We’ll be upstairs,” said Dyr, quickly.

“Of course. You have fun,” said Dyr’s mother.

The two AI’s disappeared, and Dyr’s mother took a seat at the dining room table. She experienced a sensation of gentle, inevitable bitterness.

Why couldn’t she have just gotten a kitten that would have lived unquestioning in her lap to its end?

No, that was an awful thought. The whole point was that Dyr, unlike a kitten, had a *fate*. Her love could matter for him, but it could never be the whole story. Which was precisely what she’d wanted. Therefore, she reasoned, it was this, today, that she wanted too.

But she could not keep herself from climbing the stairs an hour later to look in, to see why their chatter had trailed away. She'd listened at first, through the thin floor, but it was fuzzy talk, and so she'd switched on her radio.

Now they had been silent for fifteen minutes. She crept up the stairs.

When she went through the door her mouth fell open. They were lying together side by side on the floor, both splayed, opened out like gutted fish, and each silently exploring the other's neural spine with a tenderly roving bushy hand. Diverted, they neither of them looked up and saw her.

She'd read about this: the urge to investigate difference, to sample another's innermost programming. It came at this age. Playing doctor.

She backed out quietly.

Dyr walked with Blym after school the next day. They were going to meet the two other orphans, Nygt and Vyl. Blym wasn't quite like she'd been the day before, at Dyr's house. But she wasn't like she was before *that*, either.

They found Nygt and Vyl and went all together to a crumbling pier at the edge of the city where they could get far enough out on the water to look at the skyline of the city all at once.

To see the great mad place the humans had built.

"There is no somber fluid," said Blym.

Dyr felt himself going teenager. He had to see what it was to be fuzzy. He was going to disappoint his mother now.

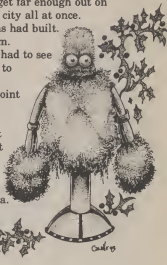
He thought: But I'm going to disappoint Blym too.

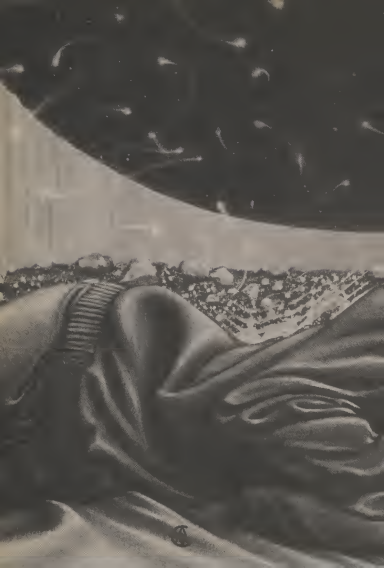
"Vacant lot," said Nygt. "Vacant lot vacant lot vacant lot vacant lot vacant lot vacant lot living chemist vacant lot vacant lot vacant lot."

Growing up a fostered AI, Dyr thought, is bridging things. Things that can't be bridged. It's schizophrenia.

"March of the precocious objects," said Vyl.

Growing up, Dyr thought: I'll do it. ●







# IN DREAMS

Andrew Weiner

The author tells us, " 'In Dreams' is my fortieth short story sale. Coincidentally, I recently sold a different story, 'Changes,' to a U.K. anthology entitled *In Dreams* (a book of SF Rock Stories). Is that an amazing synchronicity or just a shared weakness for old Roy Orbison songs?"

art: Alan M. Clark



1.

Last night I dreamed again of the wall, the green wall, rearing up over the rocky plain, shimmering softly against the blackness.

It will not be long until I cross it, as so many have crossed it already. Beginning, of course, with Zoe.

2.

I remember the day they returned to Earth, Zoe Jensen and the rest of the crew of the world's first starship. Along with billions of others, I watched on the vid as they stepped blinking from the shuttle.

The crew of the *Alpha* had left Earth fifteen months before, tunneling through holospace toward the Tau Ceti system and the planet known as Foster's World. The mission had taken a year. On their return they had been confined to quarantine for a further three months in an isolation habitat in high Earth orbit. There, while the world waited impatiently to hail its heroes, they had been exhaustively monitored and examined by medical teams operating via telepresence.

The crew's own observations indicated that Foster's World was utterly without life. Nonetheless, this quarantine was thought necessary to make absolutely certain that they posed no risk of contagion. And in the end they had received a clean bill of health.

The crew members looked glowing, ecstatic, godlike, as they stepped from the shuttle.

The world ended right then, although we did not know that yet.

3.

I had never seen such a turn-out for a guest lecture. The university auditorium was packed to the rafters, while thousands more watched on giant screens outside. But then, we had never before been visited by a star traveler.

And not just any star traveler. This was Zoe Jensen: the youngest member of the crew, the only American, the astrophysicist whose theoretical breakthroughs had done so much to open the way to the stars.

The lecture was a great success. The vids she showed us—of the strange, bleak landscape of Foster's World, the towering mountains and endless plains under the violet sky—had already played unremittingly on the world's newsnets. And her commentary echoed accounts already

delivered in dozens of public and media venues. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that she was there with us.

Beside her, the other figures sitting on the speaker's platform, the politicians and the scientists, the Nobel Prize winners and the vid stars, the leaders of industry and the arts, blurred into insignificance. There was an almost palpable aura around her, a charisma she shared only with her fellow crew members. Like no one else in that huge room, she had traveled, dreamlike, across the space between the stars. Through her, if only vicariously, we might make contact with the unknowable.

4.

At the reception following the lecture, I watched her being steered around the room by Ernest Tompkins, the head of the physics department. Several large men in badly fitting suits trailed behind them.

As this party headed past me toward a clump of particle physicists, I seized my opportunity, stationing myself in their path.

"Dr. Jensen," Tompkins said, reluctantly. "This is Dr. Baker. He runs our neuropsych department."

We shook hands. Her palm was cool, slightly damp, altogether ordinary. And still I felt a faint electric chill.

"Oh yes," she said. "I've been reading your work."

Reading my work? I found it hard to believe that an astrophysicist would take an interest in the synaptic activity of the dreaming brain. She was being polite, I thought. But I was gratified all the same.

Her hair was longer now than it had been on the vids of their arrival. She wore simply cut clothes, little makeup. Up close she looked pale, even a little strained, with dark circles around her eyes. And still, the power of her presence was, if anything, even greater at close range. I had to struggle to find my voice.

"Wonderful talk," I said. "I felt as though I were actually there."

She waved away my compliment. "I can only give people the roughest idea of what it's really like. Words and pictures just aren't enough."

Beside her, Tompkins frowned slightly, as if in disapproval of this somewhat metaphysical observation.

"Being there," she said, "was almost like a dream. A year-long dream."

"And now you've woken up."

"Yes. Almost."

Now Tompkins was tugging her arm, as though to propel her toward the waiting particle physicists. But she ignored him. "Speaking of dreams," she said, "I hear you have a wonderful Sleep Lab here. Perhaps one day you could give me a tour."

"I'd be delighted." I fumbled in my pocket for a card. "Call anytime," I said, not imagining that she would.

5.

"It's a marvelous set-up, Phil," Zoe told me, as I led her through the labyrinth of sleep rooms.

We were on first-name terms now. She had been stiff and formal on her arrival, bodyguard in tow. But she had brightened visibly on leaving him behind in the reception area.

"We have some wonderful toys, anyway."

"I read something about a new one," she said, casually. "A kind of dream analyzer."

I looked at her, startled. "That article is still in press."

She smiled. "I have my sources."

"All right, yes. We do have a new toy. But I can't show it to you. Or even talk about it, actually. Not until we publish."

"I'd really like to see it."

6.

"This is the source code," I said, holding up the optical disk.

"The dream," she said.

"Maybe," I said, carefully. "Maybe it's a dream. We haven't established that yet. For the moment, let's just call it a representation of neural activity within the visual cortex during REM sleep."

I slotted the disk into the video processor and turned on the monitor. "It's a little slow," I said, apologetically. "It takes a lot of operations to crunch the numbers."

"To make the affine transformations," she said.

Obviously she had read the article carefully. I wondered again what possible interest she could have in this process. It was a neat piece of neuroscience, it would wow my own little sector of the scientific community. But compared to traveling to the stars, it somehow seemed like very small potatoes.

Finally, the image began to form. It was rough, grainy. But it was clearly a picture of a blonde young woman in a bright yellow sweater. Zoe clapped her hands in delight.

"Incredible," she said.

The woman on the screen began to pull off her sweater, displaying large breasts. Hastily, I scanned forward to the next segment.

"Sorry," I said. "With male undergrads as subjects, you get a lot of that stuff."

Now the picture showed clouds, a bright moon-lit sky. There was a sensation of rushing through them, looking down at the Earth far below.

"Flying," Zoe said. "He's dreaming of flying."

"We get a lot of that, too."

"Unbelievable. To actually *see* dreams!"

"Like I told you, we still have to prove that they're dreams."

"What else could they be?"

"You know the science game, Zoe. If you can't prove it, don't claim it."

"What if there are some things you *can't* prove? But are true all the same?"

I looked at her, puzzled. "How do you mean?"

7.

I was watching the vidnews when I heard the car pull up outside my townhouse. The lead story was about one of Zoe's fellow crew members, the Russian geologist Boris Vigotsky. He had sequestered himself in an Italian monastery for a period of "meditation and retreat." No explanation was offered, but the footage of Vigotsky, recorded at Milan Airport, told part of the story. He looked terrible, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy, his face a pale mask.

I heard Zoe's footsteps coming up the path and I went to open the door. The car was still at the curb, a bodyguard sitting at the wheel. He would remain there all night.

At the doorstep she put down her overnight case and hugged me, kissing me briefly on the lips. I was startled, then electrified. Her lips were cool and dry, and yet they burned.

She pushed me back gently into the house, scooped up her bag, and pulled the door shut behind us. She glanced around my sparsely furnished living room. "Nice," she said.

Probably almost any living room would have looked good to her after the narrow confines of the *Alpha*. Actually I had done little with the house since moving in. I lived alone, except when my daughter came out for the vacations.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, "but I told them we were lovers. Renewing an old acquaintance."

"I don't mind at all. But why tell them anything? Can't you just make them go away?"

"They would follow me anyway. We're still under observation, Phil, even now. No one has ever done what we did. They still don't know what

the long-term impact will be. One way or another, they're going to keep us in sight."

She crossed to the window and peered out at the car parked outside. Then she drew the curtain closed.

"They also think they need to protect me. And maybe they're right. There *are* some crazy people out there. I get scared, sometimes, looking out at all those adoring faces. It's like they want something from me, and they'd be willing to tear me apart to get it."

"You're a hero, Zoe," I said. "You have to expect a little adoration."

"I'm not a hero, Phil. I'm not a saint. I'm nobody special. I'm just a working scientist who happened to catch a ride on a starship. To be honest, I'm not sure how much more of it I can take."

I nodded sympathetically. "It seems you're not the only one feeling the strain. There was an item on the news about one of your colleagues."

"Boris," she said. "I haven't spoken to him since the final debriefing, but Janine has kept in touch. She told me what was going down. In so many words."

Janine Lafleur had been the pilot of the *Alpha* and the CommEurope representative on the mission.

"You think . . ."

"It has to be," she said. "It has to be the dreams."

8.

I watched Zoe as she slept, stretched out under the covers of my bed. She wore a simple cotton nightdress. Electrode disks were glued near her eyes, tracking her eye movements. Another set of electrodes were attached to the back of her skull, feeding data to the EEG on the floor. The metal headband on her forehead was tracking her dreams.

I would have liked to monitor her heart rate, respiration and body movements as well. But there was only so much equipment I could fit in my car, and Zoe had vetoed the lab.

The readouts told me that she was deep into REM sleep. She had got there with remarkable speed, plunging down from alpha rhythms to the large, slow delta waves and back upward again to the ascending stage of rapid eye movement, or REM, sleep. Dream sleep. She had remained in that stage for the past hour, an unusually long period, and showed no sign of sinking back into normal sleep.

The red light winked softly on the dream analyzer, as the machine continued to encode her neural activity. I left Zoe and went off to sleep on the couch in the den.

I dreamed myself that night. I dreamed that I flew upward through

the clouds to the very roof of the world. I dreamed that I embraced the stars.

9.

I awoke to a cacophony of noise from the bedroom. I stumbled through to find Zoe sitting up in bed, wires still dangling from her head, groping for her traveling bag. She tipped it upside down on the bed, and half a dozen traveling alarm clocks spilled out, buzzing furiously.

Zoe had told me that she would be rising early for a breakfast meeting downtown. She had not told me how many alarms she would be setting. "Quite a collection," I said, as I helped her switch them off.

"Lately I've been finding it hard to wake up."

"Perhaps you need to sleep more."

"It doesn't matter how long I sleep. I never want to get up."

"Have you seen a doctor? There may be some physical cause."

She shook her head. "I know the cause."

I took the readout from the printer, and left her to get dressed. I was still staring at it in dismay when she came into the living room.

"Well?" she asked.

"Either I screwed up, or you've been dreaming all night."

"And that shouldn't happen?"

"It could, I suppose, although I've never seen anything like it. But that's not all." I pointed to the jagged line of the EEG reading. "Look at the wave form."

She studied it for a moment. "It's recursive."

I nodded. "It repeats itself about once every forty minutes. I'd like to map the bits of data on to one another to make sure they're isomorphic. But that's how it looks."

"And that's unusual too?" she asked. Her tone was casual, matter-of-fact.

"I would have said that it's impossible. That kind of regularity, it's . . . *spooky*."

"Perhaps we should take a look at my dream."

10.

The crude, flickering image on the monitor could not do real justice to Zoe's dream. But what it did show held me spellbound.

Rocks. A plain full of rocks, stretching out toward a violet sky. The

dreamer trudged across the plain. She walked steadily, breathed easily. She was naked.

This was, I realized, Foster's World. And then again, it was not. The real Foster's World had no breathable atmosphere, and an average daytime temperature of minus thirty Celsius. This was Foster's World as seen through the prism of a dream.

At first, the dreamer appeared to walk alone. Then I realized that she was surrounded by tiny sparks of light, dancing around her in the endless twilight, guiding her onward.

And then I saw the wall, the great green wall, rising up above the plain, smooth, unbroken, glowing softly with its own luminescence. It stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Beside me, I heard Zoe gasp. "That's it. The wall."

On the screen the dreamer moved closer, accompanied by the dancing lights, and I saw that the wall was not smooth but gently rippled. The dreamer pressed her hand against it, and it yielded slightly to the pressure.

She stood there for some minutes, both hands pressed up against the wall. And then, with no sense of transition, she was back on the rocky plain, surrounded by sparks of light.

"You can turn it off now," Zoe said. "There isn't any more. Except more of the same."

"That's all you dream?"

"Every night. Over and over. Like I told you this afternoon."

11.

*"I've been having these strange dreams, Phil."* That was what she had told me, back at the lab. *"Really strange. They're starting to frighten me."*

The dream had started on Foster's World. But it had been only an occasional event, perhaps once or twice a month. Later, on the trip home, and then in the isolation habitat, it had been more like once or twice a week. But still it hadn't really bothered her. In a way, she had enjoyed her mysterious dream of the great green wall.

Only since her return to Earth had the dream started recurring to the point where it crowded out her regular dreaming, invading her every sleeping moment.

I hadn't believed that part of her story. Surely, I thought, she still had other dreams. It was simply that she could not recall them. And surely she did not dream throughout the night. No one did.

"You're the only one who can help me," she told me, back at the Sleep Lab.



"But I don't work with dream content. That's not my specialty at all. Perhaps a clinical psychologist, or a psychiatrist. . . ."

She shook her head vigorously. "I don't want a shrink. I want you."

"What is it exactly that you want me to do?"

"I want to see it. Your analyzer can show me that it's true. That I'm not going crazy."

I was not convinced that it would tell us anything of the kind. But in the end, I consented to her plan.

How could I have denied her? I could not have denied her. Not then, and not later. She came to me from the stars, bringing strange wisdom. How strange, I did not know as yet. But perhaps I intuited it all the same.

12.

She returned to my house that evening, after her round of civic duties. She seemed restless, pacing around my living room while I went into the kitchen to fix drinks. When I returned she was staring at the picture of Erica on top of the bureau.

"My daughter," I said. "She lives out east with her mother."

"She's very pretty," Zoe said. "How old is she?"

"Almost seven."

I had spoken to Erica on the teleterminal earlier that evening. She had been excited to hear about my meeting with the glamorous star traveler.

*And did she meet God?* Erica had wanted to know. I had laughed. *I forgot to ask*, I said.

Zoe took the drink and sipped it gratefully. "I was married once."

"I know." The world knew.

"We split up a year and a half before the *Alpha*. He went off to live with a grad student. If he hadn't done that, I probably wouldn't have applied for the mission."

I nodded sympathetically.

"I saw him in New York," she said. "Just after we got back. He called and asked me to lunch. Told me he wanted to get back together."

"And?"

"That was what I had been waiting to hear. What I had been telling myself I wanted, all along. But when I actually saw him . . . I didn't feel anything. Not a thing."

"That's not unusual."

"Isn't it?"

"People change."

"Change, yes. But into *what*?"

I heard the intensity in her voice, but I was unsure how to respond to it. "Into someone more mature, I guess," I said. "Better able to deal with the past."

She shook her head in frustration. "No. That isn't what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"How do I know that I'm still the same Zoe Jensen?"

"As opposed to?"

"An altered version. Modified, somehow."

"Modified by what?"

"I don't *know*," she said, and there was a rising tone of hysteria in her voice. "By something on Foster's World, I don't know what exactly. I only know that I don't feel like myself anymore."

"Surely that's not surprising. After traveling so far, seeing so many things, it's only natural that you would feel confused, alienated, estranged. . . ."

"No," she said. "I'm not talking *metaphorically*."

"Then what are you talking about, Zoe?"

She took a deep breath. "Aliens," she said. "Or something like that. They did this to me. Changed me."

I put my hands up to my head, as if to keep it from spinning. "Aliens? There is no life on Foster's World. We know that from your own observations."

"Maybe it's not a form of life that could be detected in the usual way."

"What kind of life form would that be?"

"A higher one, I guess."

I shook my head in dismay. "You've got it all worked out," I said. "But you've got it all wrong. You're having bad dreams. You're under a lot of stress. You've gone through some changes and haven't caught up with them yet. But that's all, Zoe. There are no aliens."

"Then where do the *dreams* come from?"

Her whole body began to shake with great racking sobs. I sat down next to her on the couch and put my arm around her. She buried her head in my chest and continued to cry.

13.

I do not deceive myself into believing that Zoe Jensen loved me, although toward the end I believe that she did feel a certain affection for me. There was, that night, only her need for some kind of contact with another human being, and with her own fast-vanishing humanity.

For myself, I suppose that I did love her, and do so still. But love was

only one of the things I felt for her. There was also a kind of awe. And a growing sense of unease.

Afterward she slipped rapidly into sleep. Unable to follow her, I got up and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. I sat at the table, staring aimlessly through the window into my tiny back yard.

There was an almost full moon, lighting up my stunted magnolia tree. Stars had appeared, too, many more than I could remember from my childhood. The skies were much cleaner now. The world economy was better organized, and less dependent on fossil fuels.

Many things, in fact, were better than in my childhood. Much of the world was at peace. Population growth had finally stabilized. Science and technology continued to provide us with pleasing new toys. Utopia, our politicians liked to tell us, was within our grasp. But utopia was not what we wanted.

A millennium had come and gone, and yet we remained trapped in the human condition. We were starved of wonder, fatigued with the mundanity of our own achievements. We wanted to leave the human condition behind. We wanted the stars, or thought that we did. Now Zoe and her colleagues had given us the stars. But at what price?

I am not a clinical psychologist. I did not need to be one to see in Zoe the seeds of full-blown paranoid delusion. And yet, and yet . . . She *had* changed. *Been* changed, somehow, by her voyage to Foster's World. Her dreams told me that much.

If Zoe had been affected, what about her fellow crew members? She had implied, the previous night, that Boris Vigotsky must be suffering the same syndrome. I went into the den and flipped on the news compiler, programming it for items on "star travelers" logged in the past twenty-four hours on the major teletext services.

Several items from the local nets noted Zoe's activities. A Reuters report on Vigotsky confirmed but did not expand on what I had learned the other night. AP had the Chinese planetary scientist, Li Wu, visiting Paris for a conference. Janine Lafleur was on a goodwill visit to Senegal. Garcia Lopez, the Argentinian mission commander, was being touted as a candidate for President of the South American Confederation. And Irma Hassan, the biologist from the IPR, had checked into a clinic suffering from "nervous exhaustion."

I punched for more information. It was a late-breaking item from the Crete office of Info Middle East, picked up from Israeli-Palestinian newsvids. *Irma Hassan, the forty-two-year-old biologist recently returned from Foster's World, today checked into Jerusalem's Baruch Clinic suffering from reported "nervous exhaustion." The Baruch is a small, exclusive clinic specializing in the treatment of psychological disorder.*

*A spokesperson for the clinic did not anticipate that Dr. Hassan would*

*be staying longer than a few days. In a brief written statement issued by the Cairo office of the United Nations Space Agency, Dr. Hassan was described as being "highly stressed" by her intensive itinerary in the weeks following her return from Foster's World.*

14.

The next morning was a Saturday, a day off for both of us. Zoe had not set her many alarms. She was still sleeping when I woke around ten. I showered and dressed and ate a leisurely breakfast. I scanned the morning's headlines, but there was no new information on Irma Hassan or Boris Vigotsky.

At noon, when Zoe still showed no sign of rising by herself, I went in and looked at her. She was still asleep. But she was restless, moving her head from side to side. She seemed to mumble something. I leaned closer.

"Across," she said. "Across."

"Zoe," I said. And then louder. "Wake up, Zoe."

No effect. I reached out and touched her on the shoulder. "Zoe!" I said, again, louder still.

Her eyes blinked open. "The wall," she said.

"What?"

"I have to get across the wall."

15.

I made Zoe breakfast. She ate listlessly, finally pushing the plate away half-finished.

I showed her the print-out on Irma Hassan. Reading it, she paled visibly.

"That's it, then," she said. "They'll be coming for me."

"Coming?"

"They'll put it together. First Boris, then Irma. They'll haul me in for a check-up."

"When?"

"It will take a while to get a full report from Jerusalem. Then they'll pull Boris out of his monastery and check him out. So I have, oh, a day before they get around to me." She looked thoughtful. "But maybe that's enough time."

"To do what?"

"To get away from them. Hide somewhere."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I need to dream more, Phil. I understand that now. I need to dream this thing all the way through. I need to get across the wall."

"I'm not sure that's what you need to do at all."

"It's where I'm going, Phil. Like it or not."

I stared at her, confused. "I thought you wanted me to help you fight this thing."

"You did help me. You helped me to face up to it. To see that it's real, and that it's taking me someplace I need to go. And that I don't have any choice but to go through with it."

"The doctors at the Space Agency. . . ."

She waved her hands in dismissal. "What can they do? Delay it, that's all. Keep waking me up before I get there. But I *will* get there in the end. So it might as well be sooner than later."

"Was there anything on Foster's World that corresponded to this wall?"

"No. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. We wouldn't have seen it unless they wanted us to."

*They.*

"You still think there are aliens on Foster's World. Aliens who have somehow infected you with this dream."

"Yes," she said. "Aliens. Or something like that."

"But why? Why would they do this?"

She shrugged. "I guess I'll find out once I get across."

"What do you think is *there*? On the other side of your wall?"

She hesitated. "I think maybe it's the completion of something that started on Foster's World. Of a kind of transition."

"Transition?"

"To another way of being."

There was nothing I could say to this. Nothing I could have said, then or later, to deflect her from her course.

While waiting for Zoe to wake up, I had looked up the local number of the UN Space Agency. It was engraved in my consciousness now. But I made no move toward the teleterminal.

I wanted to do what was best for Zoe. But I did not know what that was.

"So you see," she said, "I have to get away from them. I have to finish it."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"I thought we could take your car, drive out to the country somewhere."

"We?"

She reached out across the kitchen table and touched my hand. "I still need your help, Phil," she said. "There's no one else I can trust. Please."

My skin tingled from her touch. I pulled my hand back and looked helplessly into her eyes.

"All right," I said. "I'll help you."

16.

We took a slow drive around the campus, with Zoe's driver behind us. Feeling like a character in some second-rate police vid, I used my knowledge of the terrain to lose our companion, cutting through the library parking lot and going the wrong way through a one-way tunnel.

"They'll be looking for you," I said, as we hit the on-ramp of the highway.

"But not that hard. Not yet. They'll think we just want some privacy."

We drove north, looking for a suitable retreat, taking secondary highways and unpaved roads. At last we found a place that looked suitable: a run-down fishing camp with a collection of cabins strung out around a small lake. Only a few were occupied. The season had ended months before.

After checking in, we drove into the small town up the highway and ate at the only restaurant. Over greasy chow mein and egg rolls, we discussed our plans.

"Just let me sleep," Zoe said. "For however long it takes."

"Until you die of dehydration? No."

We argued back and forth. In the end, Zoe agreed to my proposal for a step-by-step program. I would let her sleep twelve hours tonight, fourteen tomorrow. And so on, until she crossed the wall. Or until they found us, whichever came first.

17.

I woke a little after dawn, aware of a dream quickly receding from me. Rocks. Strange lights. I could not hold on to it.

Beside me, Zoe slept on. She was not scheduled to wake until one.

The cabin was rustic. There was no newtext hook-up, no vid, not even audio. And there was only so long that I could sit around staring at Zoe's EEG readouts.

I left her sleeping and drove into town to buy some groceries and a pile of newtext printouts from the local convenience store. I came back and made myself coffee and cereal in the tiny kitchenette. Then I sat down and caught up with the world.

There was nothing about Zoe's disappearance. Perhaps the authorities regarded our flight as a stolen weekend away from prying eyes. Or perhaps they already knew better.

Irma Hassan, I read, was resting comfortably at the Baruch Clinic, her husband at her bedside.

Boris Vigotsky had completed his period of retreat—describing it, according to an UNSA spokesperson, as “immensely refreshing”—and was on his way back to Moscow to receive a Medal of Honor voted by the deputies of the Russian parliament.

Janine Lafleur had canceled her engagements the day before, and was said to be suffering from a mild flu. There was no word of Li Wu or Garcia Lopez. But in my current frame of mind, even their absence from the news seemed sinister.

I realized that I had begun to think like Zoe, to succumb to her paranoia.

Perhaps Vigotsky had only wished to meditate. Perhaps Irma Hassan was merely exhausted.

Perhaps Janine Lafleur did have the flu. Surely I was reading too much meaning into this data, this tissue-thin fabrication of half-digested facts and wild suspicions.

To distract myself, I turned to the sports page. There I learned that Arthur Gomez of the Vancouver Vikings, one of the most highly paid pitchers in the American League, had been placed on the disabled list. Gomez had injured his pitching hand, almost severing one of his tendons in an accident involving a bathroom mirror.

The official story was that Gomez had been sleepwalking at the time. Some sports commentators, recalling his previous record of alcohol abuse and enthusiastic bar brawling, treated this explanation with consideration skepticism.

Gomez, however, denied any recurrence of his earlier problems. And certainly his recent performance had been exemplary. Only the previous week, he had thrown a superb two-hitter against the Havana Sugar Kings at Vancouver's SeaDome, where special guest of honor, star traveler Zoe Jensen, had thrown out the first pitch.

I put down the paper for a moment and stared at Zoe. She slept on, peacefully.

*“It was just a freaky thing, man,”* Gomez told the journalist. *“I’m having this really weird dream, like I’m walking across these rocks and I’ve got to get through this wall, this big green mother of a wall. And I’m pushing it, I’m pushing real hard. And then, wham, I wake up in my bathroom, and there’s blood and glass everywhere. What a mess, man.”*

It was with an icy feeling in my stomach that I put the paper down. Yes, I thought. What a mess.

"I was so close," Zoe said. "It was like I was sinking into the wall, getting all the way through it. And then . . ."

"I woke you up."

"Yes," she said, and I could see her fighting to keep the accusatory tone out of her voice. "You woke me up."

We were walking around the lake. I stopped and picked up a flat stone and tried to skim it across the water. It hopped once, then sank. "I used to be a lot better at this," I said.

"What did it show?" Zoe asked. "The EEG?"

"It shows a slight change in the wave forms, starting about nine hours in. After that, it gets more pronounced."

"Because the dream is changing," she said. "Because I'm getting closer all the time."

"That's one possible explanation."

"Maybe tonight," she said. "Maybe I'll get across tonight."

"Maybe you will. And then what?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you think you ought to know? What if you get there and you can't get back?"

I picked up another stone and threw it. This one didn't bounce at all.

"Well?" I asked.

"Maybe I don't come back."

"Great," I said. "Really great."

She put her hand on my arm. "It's not a question of what I want, Phil. I mean, it scares me, thinking about it. I don't want to leave all this . . ." she gestured to the lake, the trees, the sky " . . . or you. It's just what I need to do."

I got angry, then. "Stop telling me what you *need* to do, Zoe. Admit that it's what you *want*. Sure, you're scared of it. But you want it, too. Badly."

She thought about that for a moment. She nodded slowly. "Yes," she said. "I want it."

Janine Lafleur had flown back to Lyon for treatment of what was described as a "mild tropical disease."

Garcia Lopez had cancelled all his engagements for the following week—including an audience with the Pope—because of an unspecified "family emergency."



Li Wu was on his way back to China, but not before sending ripples of unease through his audience at the International Congress of Planetary Science. "Our destiny is not in the stars, but within ourselves," he is reported to have said, at the conclusion of a somewhat rambling and unfocused discourse on the origins of the Tau Ceti system. "We travel outward only to travel in. The danger is not that we will fail to achieve our potential, but that we will achieve it too well."

Chinese authorities disputed the accuracy of this translation.

In other news, dozens of baseball fans, some as far away as the Dominican Republic, had called the office of the Vancouver Vikings to report dreams like those of Arthur Gomez. Asked to comment on this peculiar phenomenon, mental health professionals in Vancouver and other North American cities cited similar dreams recently recounted by a variety of patients. The incidence of these dreams cut across the lines of age, sex, and sports affiliations.

There were unconfirmed rumors of parallel outbreaks in Moscow and Tel Aviv.

"It's this year's equivalent of UFOs," a Harvard social psychologist had pronounced. "Or windshield pitting. A kind of mass hysteria. It will blow over soon."

"I think they're dreaming about the Green Monster," Red Sox outfielder Joe Harris suggested, referring to the boundary wall in Boston's recently demolished Fenway Park.

"I suppose it could be some kind of virus," said an unnamed official at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "But a virus that gives you dreams? It's a little hard to imagine. Even if it is a virus, it's not something I'd lose sleep over."

Across the room from me, Zoe dreamed on.

20.

It was not until Tuesday evening that they found us.

I was sitting in the armchair holding the last EEG read-out when the government agents came through the door. I had been sitting there for hours, as the afternoon sun went down.

I got up slowly, stiffly.

"You're too late," I said.

"Too late?" The first agent frowned.

"She's gone."

The agent stared, puzzled, at Zoe lying on the bed. He crossed the room and knelt beside her, listening to her breathe. "What do you mean, gone? She's asleep, that's all."

"But she's gone all the same." I held out the EEG. "See."

"See what?"

I pointed at the huge, slow delta rhythms. "No more dreams. She crossed over. All the way over."

"Would you mind telling me what the fuck you're talking about?"

Zoe had been sleeping since around eleven the previous night. From the way she held me, just before, I think she knew that she was not coming back. I think I knew it too.

She had crossed over, as near as I could figure, around noon. I was with her at the time, but it took me a few minutes to observe the change in the EEG. Afterward, despite my promises, I did try to wake her, but I could not.

"They didn't tell you?" I asked the agent.

He stared at me blankly. "They didn't tell me anything. Except to bring her back. And you."

"Me? Why me?"

"Suspicion of kidnapping. That's probably bullshit, but we can clear it up, soon as the lady wakes up."

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

21.

My cell is comfortable enough. There is a carpet on the floor, an ensuite bathroom, even a video monitor. The food is acceptable. Most reading matter is supplied on request. I cannot complain about my treatment.

I have not been allowed to consult a lawyer, but this is a minor inconvenience. I do not expect to face the charges on which they are holding me. But if it does come to a trial, I can only reaffirm what I have already told them: that I could not deny her. Not anything, at any time.

How could I have denied her?

I am allowed no visitors. But there is no one from my former life that I can imagine talking to, with the possible exception of my daughter. And she would not understand any of this now. Although she may well understand it later.

They did take me to see Zoe once, in a room on another floor of this very building. Perhaps they wanted to see my reaction. Or perhaps they hoped she would somehow react to me.

I have not requested any further visits, and none have been offered. Zoe is not there, in any case. Only her shell, her chrysalis.

Fragile, beautiful Zoe. She gave us what we wanted. She gave us the stars, and more. Much more.

I gather that all Zoe's fellow crew members have followed her into the terminal sleep stage, some within days, others within weeks.

As yet, Zoe requires no artificial life support, although the doctors expect that she will soon. "Don't waste your time," I told them. "She's moved on. She's not coming back." But I have no doubt that, when the time comes, they will try heroically to maintain the illusion of life. I wonder, though, what they will do for the legions of other sleepers.

There are only a few hundred of them in the country so far, perhaps a thousand world-wide. But soon there will be many more. Because the dream is still spreading, more rapidly all the time.

The authorities, naturally, insist that the outbreak is limited and carefully confined, that a cure will be found imminently, and that all sleepers will eventually awake. I'm not sure whether anyone believes this. But, so far at least, there is remarkably little panic.

Perhaps the dreams are not yet sufficiently widespread. Perhaps people have been lulled by the authorities. But I think, too, that there are many who actually enjoy the dream, many who yearn to leave the human condition behind.

Scientists continue to work around the clock to isolate the nature of the problem. I have spent many long, pointless hours with them, going over my data on Zoe, showing them how to use the dream analyzer with their test subjects. But for now, very little is clear.

"It's not a virus," the lead researcher told me. "We know that much. In many of these cases, there's no physical contact we can trace, either with Zoe Jensen or any of the subsequent dreamers."

"Then how is it transmitted?"

The researcher looked uncomfortable. "We think it's some kind of resonance effect. Although a few days ago I wouldn't have believed such a thing were possible."

"Resonance?"

"Zoe Jensen's dream sparked other dreamers. And so on."

"Then why isn't everyone dreaming it?"

That was the million dollar question. The spread of the dream had been erratic, haphazard. Arthur Gomez had contracted the dream but not his teammates. A fan watching in the bleachers had got it, but not one behind home plate.

"If it's a resonance phenomenon," the researcher said, "you have to throw out all the old rules for tracking an epidemic. You don't think about proximity, you think about some kind of psychic attunement. Maybe these dreamers have very sensitive psychological antennae and that makes them more susceptible."

"So people who are less sensitive are safe?"

"For now, anyway."

"How do you mean, for *now*?"

"Waves," he said. "From what we're seeing, this dream is propagating itself in waves, each feeding on the one before, each more powerful. The more people who dream it, the stronger the resonance. As the signal strength builds, more and more people will tune it in."

"How many more?"

The researcher looked grey. "So far, it's a mathematical progression. We don't see an end to it yet."

"You're saying that *everyone* will dream it?"

"We don't know that. But it's possible, yes."

"And everyone will cross the wall?"

There was a brief silence. I thought about a world full of sleepers. No doubt the researcher thought about it too.

"We don't know that either," he said, at last, although his expression left little room for doubt.

I do not imagine that I will ever know the truth of these conjectures. I expect to have escaped from the human condition myself long before that.

"You think Zoe was right?" I asked. "You think it's aliens, behind this?"

"We haven't ruled it out. We haven't ruled anything out. But if there were aliens on Foster's World, why would they pull a stunt like *this*?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe it's their idea of a gift."

22.

Last night I dreamed again of the wall, the green wall, rearing up over the rocky plain, shimmering softly against the blackness.

Sparks of light danced around me. They brushed against my skin, and I felt tinglings of delight. They alighted on my ears, and I heard a lovely ghostly humming.

One of the lights was Zoe.

It will not be long now. Not long until I cross the wall, as so many have crossed it already. Not long until I join Zoe on the other side. ●

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# FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

## INTERROGATIVE ADVERBS, OR THE FOUR W'S

"*Why* is a question?" the child asked his mom.

"Because it just is. Now don't be so dumb."

"*Where* is December, and *where* can we go  
Where Santa can't see us?"

"If his beard's white as snow,  
*Then* it's December. Must you be such a pest!"

"But *when* is my father?"

"Your father's at rest  
in a field far away."

"Is he under a stone?  
Is the stone *who* he is?"

"Oh, leave me alone!  
Put on your galoshes and go out and play.  
Your mother is tired. She's had a hard day."

—Tom Disch





Bitter sorrows of the past and precious hopes for the future cascade  
through Honolulu's pure green waves in . . .

# SHARK EYE

Kathleen Ann  
Goonan

art: Laurie Harden



Lelani, nestled in her Army coat, dozed in a doorway on the mauka side of King Street.

It was just before dawn, the best time to sleep. Too late for drunks to hassle you, earlier than downtown Honolulu got moving.

She was awakened by the sound of a thief rattling her precious shopping cart. Everything she owned was in it. She stiffened, ready to fight.

"Oh, it's only you, Sam," she grumbled, when she opened her eyes to his. They were Chinese, immensely kind, almost hidden beneath shaggy white eyebrows.

"That's right. It's just old Sam." He was short, so he didn't have far to lean over as he peered into her face.

"Why'd you wake me?" she complained. Her right knee hurt worse than ever as she pulled herself to a sitting position. She groped through her pockets and found her last battered cigarette, lit it, and dragged deeply. Breakfast.

"Getting late," Sam said. "Just wanted to make sure you were awake." He turned with a slight wave, and shuffled toward the Aloha Tower.

Palm trees glittered behind him in the sharp, early morning sun. The quickening breeze drew smoke from her mouth.

Yeah, she thought as she struggled to her feet, Sam knows my name *now*. But in a few hours he'll be filled with the fire of God.

Then his eyes would be different.

Then he wouldn't even see her rags, she knew, but her soul like a breadfruit. It seemed crazy, but one day she'd actually made out what he shouted in front of the drug store in the midst of passers-by who pointedly ignored him.

He ignored them, too. As he shouted, his eyes were blank as a wave.

"Your soul is like a breadfruit!" he shouted again and again. "*My* soul is like a breadfruit!"

No wonder no one paid any attention! She could do a lot better herself, even though she didn't believe in Jesus.

No, *she* believed in evil, green-eyed Mano, the Shark God. She'd known him intimately. Mano had power, real power. He'd stolen her little girl, Jenny. Lelani respected Mano, you bet.

She took a drag, flicked ashes on the sidewalk, and rummaged through her cart. Looked like nothing had been stolen.

She grabbed the red plastic handle that said "Property of Safeway," wondering why Sam went on about *Jesus* all the time. He'd never done anything for *her* that she could tell.

Not that she'd want him to. She spat on the sidewalk as a business-woman passed.

"Good morning," Lelani said loudly. The woman didn't turn, and Lelani laughed.



But she had to get moving. The sun was visible over Nuuanu, and the morning police weren't as sympathetic as the night shift. She didn't know why they hassled her. They let the whores walk free as they pleased over on Hotel Street, just a block away. What did they care if a harmless woman slept in a doorway, or asked for a few dollars now and then?

She trundled the rattling cart toward Diamond Head, which was hidden behind the bright glass towers of downtown Honolulu. At the first corner, she waited for the light. The rumble of the busses, a steady row of them, drowned out all other sound. The light changed.

As she rolled her cart down the handicapped ramp, something green caught her eye. She bent down and picked it up.

Just another junk ring. She held it as she crossed the busy street, thinking about exactly where to put it. It was an important decision. Certain types of lucks resided in the different portions of the cart, delineated by separate paper bags, each carefully categorized: clothing, food, booze, and things to trade. When she got real hard up, she could get a few dollars at the pawn shop to buy Midnight Express.

After crossing the street, she opened her hand, and caught her breath as the majesty of the ring swept over her.

The main stone was green as the sea in shallows. Green as her husband Hele's eyes, before they turned gray with anger and disgust when she couldn't stop drinking and he took little Jennifer away from her. Jennifer, with her own merry green eyes and shining black hair. Oh, God, Jenny!

A crowd of pedestrians gathered around her, then surged across the street like an outgoing wave as the signal changed.

Lelani felt like throwing the ring back into the gutter when she thought of Hele and the way he used to carry on. She hated to be reminded of him, hated the pure, translucent green of the sea, of this ring. It made her remember the terrible things he used to shout. "You're a drunk, Lelani. Just like your father. You're no fucking good!"

It hadn't been that way when they were young. He'd told her his dream: he was Mano, the Shark God, one with the ocean when he sat out on his surfboard.

But that was about all he ever *did*, bob up and down on that board with his damn green Mano shark eyes, not making much money.

*She'd* made money for them, though, good money, at the cannery. She could have even been able to afford a real-looking fake like this, with its six fake diamonds glittering around the fake green stone. Shark, Hele! He'd fed off the pain he stirred in her heart with his other women, always better, he taunted, than her. *He* made her drink. Shark; Mano; marauder. Until she couldn't stand it any more; until the knife.

As she felt her face twist and the hot tears come, the curious looks of passers-by were nothing to her.

She even remembered that terrible night; damn this green ring! Why did she have to think about this? She reached into the end bag for a bottle, then realized it was empty. Shit! She wiped sweat from her forehead. The long-ago night focused. Sharp. Too real.

Venetian blinds buzzed in the steady night wind. Cars whooshed by, tires on wet pavement sounding like distant surf.

Hateful words poured from her; Hele's green eyes went cold in his deeply tanned face.

"Bitch!" he yelled. He raised his big hand and hit her hand on the side of her face. As her ears rang, she reached behind her and fished through the dirty dishwater until she found the handle of his best filet knife.

She didn't stab blindly. She didn't stab to kill. She went for his arm. Even after a fifth of Tokay, she had that much control.

And the damned knife went in! She took a sharp breath. Her hand went limp. The knife clattered to the floor. She'd actually *cut* old Hele. The monster could be hurt!

But not really. Instead of acting hurt, he laughed. Ruthless, *weird* laughter. He picked up the phone; the dial clicked relentlessly.

"Who are you calling?"

"The police. No court will let you keep Jenny now."

The bastard's smile was as wide as if he'd caught a thirty-foot wave. Blood oozed out of the long, ragged cut and fell on the gray linoleum in soft, regular plops. Everything was very still, except for the rustle of the wind in the banana trees in the dark right outside the kitchen window.

Then Jenny started to cry.

She should have taken Jenny right then. Her little girl had gotten out of bed, and stood in the door of the kitchen clutching her teddy bear. Her eyes were wide and terrified; her wailing climbed the scale and stuck on one high, awful note. Yeah. She should have grabbed Jenny and taken a plane to L.A. or Vegas.

Instead, two huge Samoan policemen held her while she screamed in the front yard. Her arms ached for days after the struggle. The ambulance shrieked down Kalakaua Street with Hele.

And Jenny.

Lelani took a deep breath; looked around at the glass buildings; shook her head as if surfacing from a wave that had smashed her into the sand. That had all happened a long time ago. She had been young. Now she was old.

How old? She bounced the ring in her hand, took a lungful of diesel fumes, heard the click of high heels as a woman with a briefcase strode past.

She didn't remember. Didn't want to.

She knew what she *needed* to know: the Koolau range, emerald green behind Honolulu's glittering buildings. Closer, the rim of Punchbowl, Hill-of-Sacrifice, changing with the seasons: dry and burnt-looking in summer, lush and green in the rainy season. Each nuance of weather. How long it would take that cloud hanging over Nuuanu to envelop her in sheets of rain; whether it would extend into the harbor, or if she could keep dry by crossing over to Queen Street. If the rain would last ten minutes or three hours.

That was all. Cigarettes, Midnight Express, how to use the sun and shade, where she could sleep without being hassled.

Her hand closed on the ring, even though it reminded her of Hele's eyes.

They were *Jenny's* eyes, too.

In her dreams, it was herself she stabbed, not Hele. The red blood was hers, the life pouring down the street as the ambulance shrieked away with Hele and Jenny was *hers*, not his. Funny how she'd forgotten how it really happened. Until she'd found this ring.

God. It was too real.

She looked at her palm, which stung. It was bloody. She must have held the ring pretty tight while she remembered.

It was bad, this ring. It made her remember the truth. How many bottles had she drunk to *keep* from knowing? She had to get rid of the damned thing.

She wiped her eyes, walked another block, and peered into the pawnshop. Mel ran a little apothecary on the side. Tortoise shells and a yellowed acupuncture poster with mysterious lines and dots were displayed behind the dingy window.

She pushed on the door; the red paint which spelled *Pawn Shop* in old-fashioned letters flaked off under her hand. It swung open and rang the chimes. Must be after eight.

"Mel," she called. She made sure to leave her cart in plain view, and entered the cool, dark shop.

The old man, his bald head shiny as a kukui nut, came out from his apartment in the back, through beaded curtains which clicked when he let them down.

"Lelani," he said, and smiled as he finished buttoning his yellow flowered shirt. "What you got today?"

"Not much, Mel," she said. She fumbled through her pockets, found the cigarette box, opened it, and scattered a few trinkets onto the glass counter. A bracelet, a watch, a pin.

She kept the ring in her hand. She didn't know, now. It was a nice

ring. Really pretty, even if it was fake. Silly to think a ring could stir her up so much. She just needed a drink, that was all.

She watched Mel push the stuff around. "Two dollar," he finally said. "Two *dollar*! That's a damn good watch. A Timex."

He shrugged. "Come on, now, how much you think *I* get for this? I gotta live too."

"You couldn't live without me! I bring you every good thing I find, you crook."

"Two dollar." He put the bills on the counter.

When she reached for them, the ring clattered onto the glass.

"What's this?" Mel snatched it and held it up to the light. Then he put on his eyepiece.

"A little impurity. Not much, though. Wow, where you get *this*, Lelani? Steal it off some tourist woman's hand? Some Japanese?"

She grabbed it from him. "Not for sale," she said, surprising herself.

"Like hell, Lelani! That's what you came in here for. I'll give you five hundred."

Five hundred! If Mel would offer her that, it must be worth five times as much. What would she do with that much money? Sell it! If she kept it, most likely it'd be stolen from her anyway. She'd wake up one morning and it'd be gone, and that would be that.

Lelani looked at the ring very carefully. In the dark shop, it caught the few rays of light and sparkled.

Hele's eyes. The sea at Makaha, her birthplace, out on the Waianai Coast. Breakers rising, curling, falling. Herself swimming among them, though she hadn't entered the ocean since that night.

Youth.

Jennifer.

Good things.

"I keep it, Mel," she said.

He shrugged. "Be careful with it, girl. Bring it back, my offer still stands. Tell you what, I'll give you twenty dollars a week or so for it if you like. Last you a good long time."

"No," she said. "Not for sale." She slipped the ring on her finger and left the pawnshop.

The sun was higher now, and hit her face like a blast furnace. Somehow, though, she was always cold. Lucky I got this good Army jacket, she thought. She pushed her cart toward Diamond Head until she got to the drugstore.

Sam was there, warming up.

"I *used* to be on booze," he shouted. "Then I found Je-sus! Je-sus saved me from my sins, I tell you, he saved me! He came right down and stood in front of me, right here on *Fort Street*, and he was dressed in Ocean

Pacific shorts and Reeboks. Yellow shorts! But how did I *know* he was Je-sus?" he shouted.

Lelani found herself wondering the same thing. "How?" she yelled.

Sam looked at her out of the corner of his eye. She could see he wasn't too far gone yet. He seemed to know who she was. "I'm not telling you, old lady, I'm not here to tell you. Don't hassle me."

But Lelani walked right up to him and poked him in the chest. She made sure the ring glittered in his face. It made her feel strong. It made her want to tell the truth. To everyone.

"You're just an old breadfruit, you jerk! If I gave you a fifth you'd gulp it right down. There's been no Jesus in *your* life. You know what *Jesus* does? Jesus *likes* old ladies, even if you don't. Jesus gives old ladies valuable rings, like this!" She shook it in his face. "Jesus don't wear Ocean Pacific shorts! Jesus don't wear Reeboks! Jesus don't make you stand on street corners till spit runs down your chin! Jesus is invisible! Jesus is *everywhere*, Jesus is in the gutter over on King Street, and he loves me, and he gave me this ring! *Jesus* married me, not Mano! This is my wedding ring!" She stopped. What was getting into her? She didn't give a shit about *Jesus*. Never had.

A crowd had gathered. Out of the corner of her eye, Lelani saw Cassie, the police bitch, coming down the street to break things up, maybe throw her in jail for disturbing the peace. She grabbed the handle of the cart, stuck her nose in the air, and rattled down the street.

"Thanks," Sam yelled. "You really showed me the way! I can tell you know the truth. You're a saint, lady! A real saint!"

"I'm no saint, and neither are you!" she yelled over her shoulder. "You're a *liar*."

Another block and she was safe out of reach of Cassie, who she hoped was arresting that old liar, Sam. He thought those old tightwads would give him some money if he told them something pathetic and ridiculous, like Jesus wearing Reeboks. It made her mad. She'd seen it before, but now the ring helped her *know*. He should tell the truth!

The sharp, high cries of children at play mingled with the sounds of traffic as she approached the daycare center. Good. She wasn't too late. They were still outside. She tried to go by every morning so that she could see Jenny.

She had to wait across the street for the light. As she studied the mob of kids, trying to pick out Jenny, she fumbled with a paper bag, found a bottle on the bottom with a few drops in it, drank them, and stuffed it back in the cart. Then she reached into another bag and got out some glasses she'd found, pushed them onto her face.

They helped. There was Jenny, up at the very top of the monkey bars. She'd dressed Jenny in that little yellow muu-muu she'd made on the

Sears sewing machine, the one where you spun the wheel and pumped with your feet.

Jenny's long black braids shone in the sun, and she tossed them over her shoulder as she crouched on the dull gray crossbar.

"Why don't that lady make her come down?" muttered Lelani.

Even as she spoke, the little girl slipped, shrieked, and fell to the ground.

Lelani started, but the walk light was still red and cars streamed by in front of her. She watched, helpless, as the lady rushed over to the little girl, who was screaming, picked her up, dusted her off.

She could *walk*. Lelani let her breath out. Jenny must be all right!

The light changed. She grabbed the handles and crossed the street.

Someone blew a whistle, and the children lined up and disappeared inside the door. Jenny was gone. That shark Mano! That shark Hele! The ring flashed as she grabbed the chain link fence and shook it hard, making it bend in big waves.

"He took my *baby*!" she screamed, but the roar of the traffic drowned it out. She could scream all she liked, out on the streets, and no one ever seemed to care. She was invisible.

She stopped, and looked at the ring.

What a strong, powerful green it was! She felt as if the glittering diamonds were cutting open her mind, cutting open her heart.

And she *remembered*. Sure she did! Damn the ring! Jenny was *gone*. Gone for her.

It was even a long time ago that Jenny had gone to college on the mainland, she realized. The last time she'd seen Hele, he'd said, "Jenny thinks you're dead. Do her a favor. Let her believe it."

But Lelani, she knew a thing or two about courts. When Jenny came back from college, they made Hele give her Jenny's address. But she'd never told Jenny she was alive. She was afraid.

What a morning! Lelani felt tired already. She was old. Jenny was gone. She hadn't slept at all last night.

She made it two blocks, to the library, to the circle of banyan trees whose upper branches twined together. She lay down on the grass next to her cart, and slept.

Then someone was shaking her, and she shrugged her shoulder. Damn police bitch!

"So, why you wanna give me such a hard time, Lelani?" Sam asked. But he smiled and pulled out a wad of bills as he lowered himself to the ground. "Not bad," he said. "I really made a good haul this morning."

"You old hypocrite," she said, sitting up. "But I'm sorry I called you a liar. That wasn't nice. *Did* you see Jesus? I mean, *really*?"

He nodded. His face was heavily creased, and the creases were full of

grime. The sun made his white hair blaze around his dark face. "I did. But you were right. I *was* a liar, today. I saw Jesus a long time ago. C'mon, Lelani, do you think I'd talk about him so much if I *hadn't* seen him? He wasn't wearing Reeboks. I just said that to get their attention. He was wearing a red swimsuit. He was sitting on his board, out at Makaha."

"Yeah, right. So how did you know he was *Jesus*?"

Sam shrugged. "He was sitting next to me. He had a kind of funny look, you know, he was one *da kine* dude. He said, I bring you a big wave, the biggest wave, you ride like crazy and win."

"Win what?" asked Lelani, being careful not to look at the ring. She was afraid of what it might make her remember next.

"The International Surfing Championship." Sam grinned.

"Oh. Yeah?" Lelani didn't know whether or not to believe him, but didn't really care. "You were probably just smoking that pakalolo."

"So? Jesus was *real*. He did what he *said* he'd do. I won."

"That don't make no difference. You know who I think sent that wave?"

"Who?"

"*Mano*, you fool, that's who! Who else is out there in the ocean? Nothing but sharks."

"Nah. *Mano* is *Mano*. He never helps you. *Kuhaimoana*, *he's* the kind shark."

"There's no kind shark." She laughed at the thought, a croaky old lady's laugh roughened by whisky and cigarettes.

Sam nodded. "I'm telling you. There's about fifty of those shark gods. *Mano's* just a little one, puny. He don't have much power. I know about this stuff, Lelani. My mother, she was Hawaiian."

"I don't care if your mother was *Pele*. *Mano* is *real*. *Mano* is strong. He steals little girls."

"You're probably right. And Jesus gave you the ring."

She shrugged. "I was kidding. I don't care much for Jesus; he don't care much for me. Maybe it *was*—who? *Kuhaimoana*?" *Kuhaimoana*. If only bad could switch to good so easy, with just a new word.

Sam took her hand. "Yeah, that's a real nice ring, Lelani. Now you can afford rehab."

Lelani pulled her hand back. "Don't want no rehab. Don't do no damn good, anyway."

"Yeah, old lady, but if you end up in the E.R., they might take a look at that ring and decide to use it to pay for a little stretch of rehab for you."

"They can't do that. It's *mine*." She never knew if Sam was kidding, but she felt uncomfortable. She woke up in Queens E.R. at least once a month. "They can't really take my ring, can they?"

"Those social workers think they own the world. They did it to *me*. Hell, I had three hundred dollars one night, do you believe it? Three hundred. I was walking down Fort Street, passed out and hit my head. I woke up in rehab. They said I could afford it. Had to stay in the damned place two weeks, too! Pretty near drove me crazy."

Lelani shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. Mano, he's one crazy bastard. He stole my Jenny, left me all alone down here to rot. And if you're such a good surfer, if Jesus loves you so much, how come *you* ended up down here too?"

Sam smiled. Lelani was struck by the pure happiness on his strange, old face. "I had one good day. I was on TV. World Champion. What more could I want?"

What more could *I* want, wondered Lelani. Not to remember, that's all. Too much, too sad.

"Come on, old lady, I'll help you up. Buy you a drink." Sam's voice was gentle; friendly.

"Naa," she said. She waved him away. "I'm real tired. Let me go back to sleep."

First, in her dream, was the ring. Terrifyingly green. Powerful.

Then, green changed to the eye of a shark. Hele!

No.

Kuhaimoana.

Shark-who-helps-humans.

Never mind the courts, said Kuhaimoana. Never mind the courts, or the judge, or the way Hele moves Jenny from house to house whenever you find them and hang around across the street.

Kuhaimoana took that judge in his jaws and said, Justice! Justice for Lelani, or I bite you in two, you sonovabitch!

The judge said that he'd retry the case.

He lived with Lelani's story. He took it home. He slept with it. He molded the story to fit his body like a lover, and it was many things to him. It was a slow-moving stream in sunlight, draped with leaves. It was huli huli chicken; a mother sewing a yellow muu-muu; time's long, unending pain.

And when Mano came and grabbed Jenny, a funny thing happened. The judge sat down on the beach, laced on some Reeboks, and walked off across the ocean to find her.

He swam back as a shark, and Jenny hung limp from his jaws. He set her down in front of Lelani.

Jenny jumped up, and hugged her tight as a monkey.

"Lady, wake up." The high, tiny voice! Jenny!

Lelani sat up, rubbed her eyes, and saw that the ring was still on her finger. There she was, the little girl. She was carrying a lunch box.



Lelani stared at the pure, smooth face, brown skin like Hele. Pretty smile.

But her eyes were black.

Not Jenny. Not Jenny.

Lelani waited for the pain, but it didn't come. She looked at the ring. It seemed to be urging her on.

"My name's Lelani," she said, surprised that her voice was so clear. "What's yours?"

"Carlina." said the girl.

"Didn't no one tell you not to talk to strangers?" Lelani scolded.

Carlina smiled sweetly at her. "You're not a stranger! I see you every day outside the fence. Remember? You wave at me. One day you called me Jenny. But I'm not Jenny. I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen."

Lelani took a deep breath. "Jenny was my little girl who looked like you," she said.

Carlina looked at her doubtfully. "You never had a little girl."

"I don't any more, that's for sure. How old are you?"

"Five."

"How come your mother lets you walk around here alone?"

Carlina looked indignant. "I'm big enough! She's at work. She won't be home till later. My brother is supposed to come get me after school, but he's sick today, so I get to walk home by myself."

"You better get going, then."

"Maybe I'll see you tomorrow, and I'll wave," said Carlina. "That's a real pretty ring." She walked off.

Lelani edged back to a tree and leaned against it. Jenny.

Now that the little girl was gone, the pain started. That hellish ring! Why was this happening to her?

She struggled to her feet and reached into the booze bag. Empty bottles clanked together.

Sell it! Sell the ring! It wasn't doing her any good. Some social worker would just use it to get her into rehab. She needed a drink. Two dollars wouldn't go far. But she'd get a better deal out of old Mel, that was for sure, or she'd go somewhere else.

She started back toward the pawnshop. The ring flashed in the sun. Damn ring, damn dream, damn little girl!

She put her hands in her pocket; clenched them.

Then she loosened her fists.

She took one look backward toward her cart. She knew she'd never see it again if she left it, but the green look of Kuhaimoana was deep and strong.

The next bus was the right one. She got on.

No one sat next to her as it lumbered down the street. Even the old Hawaiians who rode this rusting bus to the outreaches shunned her.

She passed the street where she'd lived with Hele; passed the cannery: fifteen years of her life! Running those big machines, sweat running down her face. What for? What the hell for? Everything in Hele's name, the old shark.

By the time they got as far as Ewa, she couldn't tell where she was. All the old landmarks were gone. She pressed her face to the glass, confused. How did everything get so different?

But once she got to Nanakuli, after an hour, things fell into place. *It* hadn't changed. There wasn't any money out here. Just Hawaiians. The old shacks on the back streets were falling to pieces. Scraggly red hibiscus hid crumbling porches. Behind Nanakuli arched the haunting green cliffs of her people's land, Property of U.S. Government, No Trespassing Allowed.

She pulled the wire and got off.

She'd been to Jenny's house one time, watched Jenny come home from work while she hid behind a house down the street. She'd seen Jenny's little girl too.

Lelani shifted her clothing. It was a lot hotter out here than in the deeply shaded Honolulu streets. She felt touchy, like everybody was looking at her, an old slime lady covered in rags. "Go to hell!" she snarled at one boy who stared at her as he rode by on his bike.

"You too, lady!" he flung over his shoulder.

It was only a few blocks. She checked the mailbox. There was her name. Jenny Hanikala. She was a teacher, Hele had said.

Lelani trembled a minute, thinking Jenny might have stayed home today. She even raised her hand to knock, then dropped it. What the hell was she doing here?

Then she remembered.

Lelani reached into the mailbox and pulled out the Pacific Tel bill. She ripped it open.

It was hard to get the ring off her finger. It was so tight it scraped some skin off. Her finger stung.

The heavy green stone winked in the sun for an instant, then Lelani leafed through the pages of the bill till she felt the place to put the ring where it would give the greatest luck.

At that moment, the door opened.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Lelani dropped the envelope, and the wind blew it into the gardenia bush next to the porch.

The woman in front of her had the green eyes of Hele, the horrible gleam of the shark-eye ring.

And because she was drunk, they were blank.

In her hand was a glass with an inch of amber whisky, sitting there in front of Lelani's nose like all the promises of Sam, Jesus, and Hele wrapped up together. Jenny raised it, and took a sip.

"I *said*, old lady, what are you doing on my front porch?"

Her voice was sweet; rich and deep, carefully unslurred. Her face was lovely and still young, though Lelani saw a few slight wrinkles below the eyes.

Jenny reached up with her free hand and picked up part of her thick, shining black hair. It fell in sections from her hand behind her back. It reached almost to her knees. Lelani wanted to stroke that hair, feel its smoothness, braid it into long black braids with red ribbons at the end. She wanted to touch Jenny's face, kiss her, hold her, cry.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my mailbox?"

A little girl ran up behind her and peered out from behind the woman. "Yeah, what are you doing in our mailbox?"

Lelani reached for the porch railing to steady herself. She took a deep breath. "Jenny," she began.

"Look, old lady, I don't know what you want, or why you're reading my mail. Maybe you want to steal my unemployment check. I'm going to call the police. I got a little kid here to take care of, you know." She slammed the door in Lelani's face.

Lelani turned the knob, but the door was locked. She clenched the ring in her hand. "That's right," she said. "You sure *do*. Looks like you're doing a *great* job." She began to shout. "You have shark eyes! Like *him*." She was screaming now, "Sharks! All of you, sharks!"

She turned away from the blank, hard door and began to run down the street as best she could on her old, hurting legs. "I'll sell it to Mel," she mumbled as she felt tears start. "Get a room with a shower, some new clothes, maybe a job. Yeah. Yeah." Sure, Lelani, *sure*, the other part of her mind jibed. You'll buy enough Midnight Express to drown even the green of this damned ring. Kill yourself for sure. Can't get away from it. She gasped for breath and stumbled.

Then she heard footsteps behind her, and felt someone tug on her coat. She glanced back. It was the little girl. She said, "Wait, crazy lady, wait, *please* wait."

Lelani stopped and turned toward her. She crouched down and grabbed the girl's shoulders, saw her eyes widen in fear. They stared at each other.

One side of the little girl's hair was snarled in an old braid; the other side had loosened and hung in greasy strands. Her dress had smudges of dirt, as did her face. Her little bare feet were dusty.

And her eyes were as green as the ring which Lelani still held.

"Hold out your hand," Lelani commanded.

The little girl did as she was told.

"Give this to your mother," she said, and pressed the ring into her palm. She watched grubby fingers close over it.

But it wasn't for Jenny, no. For Jenny, it would be wicked. Lelani smiled for a second, thinking of all the pain it would cause her unfeeling daughter.

No, it was for this little girl. So truth could be in her life, and comb her hair, sew her a new dress, take care of her as she ought to be taken care of. The shark eye would watch over her, the eye of Kuhaimoana, the good one. He would burn away the darkness of Jenny's heart, where Hele had held sway for too many years, filling it with his hate and anger.

Lelani pulled the girl toward her, hugged her. The girl struggled and broke away. She looked at Lelani doubtfully.

"Go!" hissed Lelani. "Now!" Before she could grab back all that truth and light, have it for herself, that clean, bright turning of mind so fearful, so harsh, so searing.

Her granddaughter ran down the road, quick as a triggerfish. Her yellow dress was like a piece of sunlight, first glowing, now dim, as she ran through patches of sun and shade cast by old mimosas, which filled the air with their sweet, heavy scent.

Lelani watched as the woman embraced the child in a cloak of black hair. They went inside, and she heard the door slam once more in the flimsy single-wall house.

Lelani walked firmly toward the bus stop.

She didn't have to wait too long for the next bus to come by. But boy, was it hot!

She tossed her coat by the side of the road, climbed in, and showed the driver her transfer.

"You can't get back on like that, lady. You got to pay again."

"Hey, I know my rights! I'm a senior citizen!"

She didn't think she really was, not quite. In fact, as she spoke, she remembered. She was fifty-three years old. She almost opened her mouth to tell him.

But the driver believed her. "Okay, auntie."

She sat in the front seat and watched the deep green valleys roll by. She hadn't been out here in years. Clouds hung dark against the mountains; ancient valleys echoed sun and shadow.

Then she was home.

She got off at the Makaha 7-11 and bought a beer. Then she crossed the street, sat on the beach and drank it. A new condo sparkled next to

her, all glass and steel. Silly of them to build it so close to the water, she thought. One good wave, kablooeey.

She finished the beer, crumpled the can, and took off her Army boots. She stuck her toes in the hot sand.

She waited half the afternoon. When she asked for a cigarette, some man gave her a whole package, and she smoked every one. She watched the surf get high and ragged. The lifeguard planted the red warning flag in the sand and yelled at everybody to get out of the water.

She watched the horizon eagerly then. He wouldn't make her wait much longer, would he?

Finally she saw him.

Sam was right. It wasn't Mano at all. And it sure as hell wasn't Jesus. It was Kuhaimoana.

He was sitting out there, a speck on the enormous green ocean, bobbing on his surfboard, waiting for just the right wave. He hadn't paddled out. Lelani had been watching sharp. No, he had just *appeared*.

Grinning, she pulled her battered dress off over her head and dropped it on the sand.

As she walked down the steep slope into the surf, the lifeguard yelled, "Hey, lady, this ain't no nude beach. Come on back here!"

Lelani didn't stop. She could barely hear him over the roar of the surf. Did he think she was a fool? They'd throw her in jail if she went back. Later for that. Right now, the green eyes of Kuhaimoana called her, loud and clear.

She made it through the deafening shorebreak easily. The lifeguard thought *these* were big waves? Puny; nothing! *Babies* could swim in bigger waves than these! So what if the wash reached to her breasts and sucked at her legs like a whirlpool? She waded in further, then stood her ground as a fifteen footer rose out of the green sea.

It hung over her for a long time, shot with light, like a question.

She took a deep breath.

The last instant before it would have pulverized her, she dove into its base and caught the silky, exhilarating undertow through a swirl of sand. At first, in the underwater roil, she thought she hadn't made it, that the wave would catch her like a monster hand and snap her neck.

But her timing was still good.

When she bobbed up beyond the surfline, she turned and laughed, caught her breath as the chill of the sea squeezed her lungs.

Ah, it felt so good! That old Mano, that old rascal Hele! They were gone now, gone forever. Before the courts, before the knife, before the hate, *this* was it. She remembered now. How could she have forgotten for so long?

A wave raised her high, and the seaward horizon flattened like a single, long note of music.

She saw Kuhaimoana catch that note, that shining green tone, and his surfboard rushed toward her like a knife in the bright, hot sun. It glittered, full of power, like Sam's glory train, hissing as spray tendriled in the buffeting offshore wind. The eye of the shark which gave truth.

She knew then for sure, as she saw it curl and began to break, that her soul wasn't anything like a breadfruit.

It was pure, sweet, and green as time itself. ●

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## NEXT ISSUE

We start a new year next month, and that means that in the months ahead we'll be bringing you another year's worth of State-of-the-Art, top-of-the-line new stories here at *Asimov's*, stories that define the Cutting Edge in science fiction today.

Our January issue, for instance, coming up next month, is jam-packed with the biggest names in science fiction and with the rising new stars who'll be the Big Names of the future. Our January cover story is by critically acclaimed writer **A.A. Attanasio**, who catapults us deep into space and far into a bewilderingly high-tech future for an exciting and dazzlingly fast-paced story of adventure and intrigue, full of warring space-ships, killer robots, sinister fortress satellites, thousand-year-old brains in bottles, desperate gambles, thrilling chases, and hairbreadth escapes, as the strangely altered distant heirs of humanity undertake a perilous search for the "Remains of Adam." Then Nebula-winner **Michael Swanwick** returns to take us to a world of intense beauty, horrifying cruelty, and incandescent strangeness, and there regales us with "The Changeling's Tale"; new writer **L. Timmel Duchamp** makes an exceptionally powerful *Asimov's* debut with a compelling novella that takes a frank and uncompromising look at some "Things of the Flesh"; multiple Hugo and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis** tackles one of the eternally vexing questions and provides some very funny explanations of "Why the World Didn't End Last Tuesday"; **Steven Utley** sails us into exotic Caribbean seas for a tale of mystery, dread, and wonder, in "Edge of the Wind"; and veteran author **Tom Purdom** takes us to a troubled future for a subtle, bittersweet,

(Continued on page 143)

## OBJECTS AND GROUND

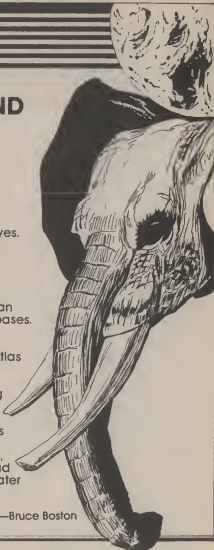
The world rests  
upon the shoulders  
of an elephant.  
Grainy gray hide.  
Ivory tusks.  
Ears like cabbage leaves.

Said elephant stands  
atop two pillars,  
front feet on one,  
back feet on the other.  
The pillars are Corinthian  
with French gargoyle bases.

Clutching those bases,  
the massive hands of Atlas  
strain eternally  
with arms upraised  
against the burgeoning  
weight of the ages.

The beard of mad Atlas  
never stops growing.  
Iron-booted and proud,  
he floats upon a lily pad  
in a pool of painted water  
on a forged Monet.

—Bruce Boston



# TAGGING THE MOON

S. P. Somtow

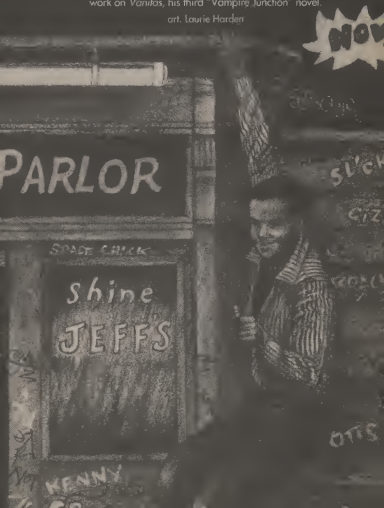
F'S  SKINE





S. P. Somtow's stage play, *Though I Walk Through the Valley*, premiered in San Francisco in October. His latest novels include *Valentine*, *Forest of the Night*, and *The Wizard's Apprentice* (a children's book just out from Atheneum). Mr. Somtow is currently at work on *Vanitas*, his third "Vampire Junction" novel.

art. Laurie Harden



I was there the night they shot Bobby Donahue. I saw him cartwheel through the air from the top edge of the overpass down toward the screaming traffic. But I never saw him hit the pavement. Nobody did. Not me, not the police, not even the dudes in the Fox 11 news chopper. I never saw him die.

And that's how I know that everything Bobby told me, and I saw, is true . . . the visions . . . the revelations . . . the aliens from another world.

It's hard to be a has-been at twenty-four, but that's what I was back in the summer of '92. I lived under an overpass with a half dozen homies. On the first Tuesday of the month I sold my blood; Saturdays I sold my sister. My sister was sullen and pockmarked and usually fetched less than what Dr. Sayeed paid for a pint of my extra rare blood type. But hey, I was doing her a favor compared to the shit they made her do at the home.

I wasn't a basehead no more, but I could still put away a fifth of Jim Beam all by myself, and that's what I liked to do Sundays. That, or sit leaning against the monuments at Forest Lawn, far from the roar over the freeway, or kicking it in the old hood, up toward Sylmar, where I had like family, which I never spoke to, and friends, which I did.

And then there were the kids—the ones that looked up to me—the ones who had heard the stories. Half the stories were bullshit but they had enough truth in them that I had a hard time denying them. I'd known Bobby Donahue since he was five years old, which was when they moved to the trailer park off of Hubbard, maybe ten years ago. But he was like maybe fourteen when he started to hang with the other kids on the corner of Jackman. He was a dreamy kid who always read books and always understood what people were talking about on television. I don't know why he got into tagging. Maybe it was because his father blew off to Arizona and his mom became the neighborhood slut. Maybe it was because he stopped going to school, said it bored him. Maybe it was because his brother shot himself in the head with a .38. Shit, I don't know, but I ended up father, mother, and brother to him, even though I only saw him maybe once every two or three weekends . . . whenever they weren't detaining him overnight or switching his social worker on him.

Bobby was obsessed with tagging. You'd be walking down the street together past that waist-high picket fence, just kicking it and talking about some dope bitch you saw last night, and then, glancing back, you'd see that every one of them pickets had a name, and that name was *NOVA*, which means an exploding star, with a rainbow-colored starburst over the *O*. And you'd be thinking, how the fuck'd *that* get there? Bobby was quick. Anything with a white surface wide enough to fit him seemed to call out to him. He tagged with Mean Streaks, markers, spray cans,

acrylics, pastels, crayons, finger paint, and at least once with his own blood.

Which is why I don't go back to the old hood that much no more.

Bobby's favorite saying was, "One day, I'm a tag the fucking moon. You'll fucking see then, everyone's gonna see me up."

I can still see him now, that last week. He was kind of small for his age. He had squinty dark green eyes and a mass of dirty-brown hair, and he dressed like a cholo, in them oversize pants. He smelled of leather and tobacco. He was going to be sixteen soon, the magic age when driving becomes legal and crime stops paying, but he still had the look that gets you into movies for half price. He totally hated the idea of turning sixteen, and he was hanging out with me a lot, riding the RTD over the Hill and meeting me, as though by accident, next to my favorite dumpster or somewhere in Forest Lawn, gazing at the tombs of the rich and famous.

Or just in Hollywood somewhere, browsing at the Cahuenga newsstand. "Yo, buy my ass a burger, dude . . . I ain't eaten in like days."

"Why not?" I'm putting down this copy of *Fat Leather Chicks* that I've been leafing through, wondering if they'll throw him out for loitering by the porn. "Don't you have a home to go to no more?"

"Shit no. Dad's in detox and Mom's at some big old battered women's shelter. Come on, just one burger, I'll totally pay you back."

"Yeah, right." I'm still all flush from selling blood to Dr. Sayeed. So we walk down to the McDonald's on Hollywood Boulevard and he eats more than just one burger; he gets three Big Macs plus two orders of fries, and I'm all watching him, wondering where it can all go.

"Tag the moon yet?" I ask him in the interval between a Big Mac and a gulp of Coke.

"Working on it," he says. And he sounds like he means it.

He usually has something on his mind when he comes all the way into Hollywood to find me, but I know that he's going to take his own sweet time getting to the point. So I wait. He tells me he's been tagging all over. "In one night," he says, "I hit up Van Nuys, Pacoima, Sun Valley, Studio City, and Reseda. You know that ten story building with the big Marilyn Monroe all the way down one side? I'm up on Marilyn's left tit, dude, I hid in the bathroom of some law office until after they closed and then I like climbed out along the ledge and I hung there with my legs wrapped around a flagpole, fucking *hung* there, and I wrote *Nova* all the way around her nipple. Wore out three Mean Streaks doing it, too," he adds. "I'll have to punk the stationery store for some more."

"Let me buy them for you, dude. It's a shame for you to get busted stealing markers." I knew what jail was like; Bobby didn't.

"You'd do that for me? Thanks, Todd." He looked at me with the kind of hero-worship I was getting less and less of these days.

"We didn't even have Mean Streaks in my day," I said. "Just spray cans and shit. No high technology."

"I love it when you old guys talk about them Stone Age times." The thing about that is, he was only half joking. To be twenty-four years old, in the minds of the kids Bobby Donahue hung out with, was to be a relic of an ancient civilization. "But you're the best," he said. "Last night I saw you still up on the 'F' on the roof of the Wells Fargo bank on Victory. That's been there almost all my life. None of my friends know how you did it. And nobody's fucking been able to wipe it off. And all them freeway signs. The piece you threw on the back of *Van Nuys Bud—3/4 mile . . .* you must of fucking had wings to get up there without getting caught."

He wolfed down another burger.

"Maybe we all had wings in them Stone Age days," I said, laughing.

Then Bobby's all, "You're probably wondering why I came looking for you all the way down in Hollywood. Dude, I been looking for you half the night. It's important."

"Okay." Out of the corner of my eye, up at the corner, I could see two kids stealing a car. They were too new at this to know that the seedy man with the WILL WORK FOR FOOD sign around his neck was a undercover cop. Life's a bitch. "What's your point?" I said.

"It's the aliens, dude. I been seeing them. And like, now they want to meet you."

Okay, so maybe Bobby wasn't, like, all there. He had visions. He didn't need shrooming . . . his whole life was one long acid trip flashback. Once, he was maybe eight or nine, he was running for his life with four truant officers on his back, ready to slap the plastic ties around his wrists, and I saw him from the apartment window—I still had parents back then—and he was sprinting through traffic with his eyes closed, dodging the cars as they snarled and rammed one another to avoid him . . . but with the chaos raging around him he's all calm . . . concentrated . . . compacted into himself. He darted, he danced, he spun, beautiful as a pinball.

I ran down the stairs to let him into my building and he ran past me and I stopped the police at the door, I'm all, "Yeah, he's my brother, he's on C track, he ain't supposed to be in school until February. . . ." Lying comes easy to me. Then like, I turn around and see him and he asks me, "The aliens. Are they gone yet?"

"Police, Bobby. They were police."

"No, not *them*, Todd . . . the *others*! They were in the boys' restroom when I was trying to pee. That's why I ditched."

Years later, I'm telling the story of this to Dr. Margaret Yao, who's

some kind of therapist and who's writing a book about taggers. She's my friend, she thinks, though it's fucking transparent the way she tries to pump me for anecdotes she can use in her book.

"And what was Bobby Donahue doing when he had this . . . ah . . . extraterrestrial visitation?" she says, lighting her second joint from the butt end of her first.

"He was throwing a piece. On the bathroom wall."

"You mean putting up graffiti?" She notes my choice of words in the section of her notebook marked "special jargon."

"Well," I tell her, "piecing ain't the same as tagging. It's more complicated. It's when you do, like, a whole picture . . . kind of like *art*."

She scribbles in her notebook. "But what I'm getting at," she says, "is this. The visitations from aliens . . . they are associated with the graffiti somehow . . . aren't they? So maybe it's his alienation speaking." She becomes all excited now. She pours me some of her special brew, Tsing Dao she calls it, some kind of Chinese beer. I love the way the Chinese characters curve around the beer can, the way the brushstrokes swell up and die away, like miniature waves. I wish I could write Chinese. Chinese is a tagger's dope ass dream language. I'm all watching the drops of condensation on the beer can and the way they distort the strokes of the calligraphy. I don't really hear Margaret when she launches into them theories of hers. She weaves them twenty-syllable words around each other like the way I used to write *Pricer* on the freeway signs, with the letters winding in and out of each other like snakes making love.

"Are you listening to me?" Margaret says. "Aliens and alienation, I mean, here's this kid, grows up on a diet of sci-fi, neglected, has a desperate need to throw up his ego-symbol all over town . . . the UFO angle's a natural. In the middle ages, he would've been seeing saints and angels. Like Joan of Arc did."

"Yeah," I say. "Can you lend me five bucks?"

She stops and looks at me like I'm a sort of a thing in a museum, which I guess, to her, I am. Every night she goes home to a one-bedroom in Tarzana, pool, jacuzzi, New Age music piped into the lobby. Shit.

She's all, "Are you a little short?"

"I'd love to buy, like, a blanket. November's coming. There ain't no central heating in the overpass hotel. I saw a blanket in the dumpster Saturday, but it was on some Mexican dude's turf."

She goes on staring at me and I think she's getting, you know, *wet* over what I'm saying. I'm so horny I could fuck a hole in a toilet stall wall. She takes a five-dollar bill out of her purse and folds it and purses her lips, and she's all, "But tell me more about Bobby Donahue. He seems such a *character*, I mean, so full of the energy and rage of the streets."

"He's gone now," I said.

"Dead?" She tsck-tscked with the earnest sympathy they all seem to have, those Chinese women who went to Berkeley who live in Tarzana who are writing books about us who think they love us but who never ever know us.

"I didn't say *dead*, I said *gone*."

"So you're into denial," she said. I tried to grab for the five bucks but it was just out of reach. Then she flicked it onto my lap.

So I'm all, "They want to meet me," as we deposit the trash and walk out onto Hollywood Boulevard, me in my year-old unwashed jeans and him in his cholo pants, ten sizes too big and freshly jacked from the swap meet. "You shrooming or something?"

Bobby skips from star to star alongside the street to the hip-hop beat of a sidewalk ghettoblaster. I walk as quick as I can but I don't know, I feel weak and old; maybe it's because I've been sapped of all that blood, maybe it's just I'm over the hill for being a street kid, just not up to it no more. I barely catch up to his ass when he's off again and yeah, when I glance over my shoulder there's the *Nova*-starburst up on the window of a B. Dalton, blocking the Rush Limbaugh dump display.

We turned down a side alley, a dead end, behind Cherokee. Where the alley met the boulevard there wasn't that much, just the usual gang initials, and, here and there, a name crossed out. But further in, here and there became a jumble, then a jungle . . . letters and logos crisscrossing one another, melding into one great abstract swath of colors . . . and full-scale pieces too . . . there was a bad ass picture of the Rodney King beating, with Daryl Gates hovering over it in black robes and leathery wings and the eyes of a demon . . . there was a dance of death, the old man with the sickle leading a capering procession of skaters, surfers, taggers, and gangbangers across a lurid cityscape silhouetted against vermilion flames . . . there was a life-size Elvis in a *Hamlet* costume, with a guitar in one hand and a skull in the other . . . there was a '57 Chevy pointing ass up from a sand dune circled by cactus . . . we saw all these things in the light from distant neon signs. And the names were everywhere, a whole history of tagging . . . names like, *Squirt*, *Tryer*, *Phaks*, *Silem*, *Carne*, kind of like the Vietnam Memorial, because like, half the taggers who were up were, like, dead now, or maybe worse than dead, drowning in their own addictions, like me.

I saw myself up, real high, in the hardest to reach ass corner of the whole wall. *Pricer*, it still read, in the curlicue lettering style I invented which is now one of the most popular styles. Smog and acid rain had dulled the colors, but I still felt the tug of my own past self, and I wondered if I'd ever be free again.

I barely looked away and when I looked back up in the corner I saw

Nova too, scrawled above me, and I saw the shadow of Bobby Donahue skittering down the wall . . . and I heard him laugh. Then he was right by me, smiling. "Jesus," I said, "you make me nervous, how you do that shit."

Bobby said, "It's like the story of the eagle and the robin; the eagle said he could fly the highest, but the robin rode on his back and like, when the eagle was so high he could barely flap his wings no more, the robin soared up an inch or two and won the bet."

"Where'd you hear that?" I knew his parents would never have told him a story, let alone his social worker or someone like that.

"The aliens told me," he said. And he pointed to the wall at the end of the blind alley, where there's a dope ass piece, maybe eight feet square, showing the L.A. riots, like, a view from a news chopper . . . and like, I see this black Porsche parked against the dead end, flush against the dumpster, with a homeless dude asleep against the wheel. The windows are all black and the license plate is black and it don't have no letters or numbers on it. It's a scary thing, because no way could this car have been driven into this position, stretched across the alley with each bumper a half inch or less from the walls; it was like the car had dropped into place out of the night sky. Still, there wasn't nothing *alien* about it. It was just a car.

I'm all, "Yeah. It's a car."

The door opens and there are two men: Laurel and Hardy—a tall man and a fat man. The fat man's all wearing surfer pants and a neon tank top and pink oversized shades. The tall man's dressed like an undertaker. But they look human to me, even if they aren't a matched set.

Bobby motions and I follow him. He's all eager; he doesn't have that I-don't-give-a-shit look that he usually does. He says, "Hey, I want you to meet my homie, Todd. He writes *Pricer*. You've heard of him."

"We certainly have," says the fat one, folding away his shades to reveal a second pair of eyeglasses underneath. "You're something of a legend, I understand."

"A legend? Hardly. I guess old Bobby been exaggerating, as usual."

"It's not through Bobby that we've learned of you," says the undertaker dude, who even *talks* like an undertaker, with a low-pitched, raspy, nervous-making voice. "It was through, ah, *other* channels."

"Fuck, Todd, they been watching us! All the time we thought we were alone, streaking our way from wall to wall, hanging from ledges, clinging to ducts, they were there too . . . watching . . . like, you know, guardian angels or something. Or like the dads we never had."

"So, they're undercover?"

"No. Like I told you. They're aliens. They're fucking from another world. They came here in a fucking spaceship. And they're here to visit

us. No 'take me to your leader' bullshit. They came here for us . . . because they're taggers too."

I glance from one to the other. The fat one's jowls are quivering. The undertaker one says, "He expresses himself forcefully, although he somewhat oversimplifies the situation. My companion and I have been traveling for some time now; eons, to be precise. Your friend calls us taggers, which is true only in the sense that it pleases us to leave behind us, on those worlds as yet unsullied by the presence of life, on those dead surfaces which cry out for the tumult of living souls . . . small traces of our being . . . signatures, if you will . . . tiny pieces of DNA that will, after eons to come, evolve to self-awareness and proclaim to those who follow us that we were here first."

There's a long silence. Bobby's all smiling, happy, expecting me to totally accept at face value the idea that these two geeks in a fancy car are not two geeks at all but like, the Creator, God. I don't know about Bobby but I've been on the street long enough to know what a rat smells like, and I'm real surprised at Bobby. I'm all wondering what drugs they've given him. Or worse, telling him they're God, maybe they've given him religion. And I'm thinking, Bobby, Bobby, what have they done to you? Ain't it enough that your parents didn't love you, that you didn't have no money and were born on the wrong side of town, so now the one thing that you really own, the thing inside of you that's you and no one else, has got to get sucked into some shitass cult that brainwashes taggers? I guess he realizes that I'm angry with him, with all of them. And so he cranks into his motormouth mode, which is what happens when he gets nervous, and he's all talking about me, about the legend I supposedly am . . . the tall tales the young taggers tell themselves when they're overnighing at juvenile detention waiting for parents who don't want to come pick them up. "Let me tell you what Todd done one time," he says, and the so-called aliens both relax a little, smile, even, "the night before his sixteenth birthday . . . there's a wall that runs along the edge of California, next to a road called Oceanside, and on the street side it's a low wall you can lean against, but on the beach side it like falls straight down, a sheer drop, all the way down . . . sand in some parts, rock in others, concrete where they've built a concession stand or a shit-house. So it's like midnight, and it's a full moon, and Todd takes off there in this truck he stole, and he climbs over the wall and then . . . clinging to the wall like Spider-Man . . . high above the sea . . . he writes on the bricks in white spray paint, over and over and over, brick by brick by brick, until you can see *Pricer* slowly forming on that wall, see it from way over on the pier, and it's all glimmering in the moonlight, and he's there, like Spidey, breaking all the fucking laws of gravity, for the longest time, scurrying up and down and fucking *breaking* that name out of the brick, and it's the most beautiful thing I ever saw—"



"You never saw it," I said, "and anyways, you were probably like five years old at the time—"

"—and anyways," I'm all telling this to Dr. Yao so she can toss me a miserable few bucks so I can buy myself some smokes, "it wasn't true. I had a rope ladder. It's just a myth."

But she writes it all down religiously, adding, "Myth, Todd, is perhaps the most profound truth of them all."

She can say that all she wants, because she makes more money by asking an hour's worth of dumb questions than I've ever made in a week, except when I was running drugs, of course, but that don't fucking count.

"—and anyways it *is* true, and I saw it and it is a true memory, cuz that was the first time I ever run away from home, and I took the RTD all the way to Santa Monica because I heard they have better child protection agents there." Five years old and running away from home, I thought. But the aliens just kind of ts-k-ts-ked and went along with his bullshit. "I know," Bobby said, "because of that full moon . . . and looking up at it . . . and down the wall at the name that was materializing out of the dark brick wall . . . and thinking . . . the wall is cool, but one day I'm a write on the fucking *moon*."

The fat alien was all moaning and almost like having an orgasm right there in the alley over what Bobby was telling them. I had him pegged for a pervert. Hey, maybe the night wouldn't be wasted after all. Maybe I could sell him on a date with my sister, half now, half on delivery.

"—Plus," I tell Dr. Yao, "he didn't say that, at one minute past midnight, my birthday, they came to the wall and hauled my ass in and threw the book at me . . . not just the vandalism but the GTA, with that stolen truck . . . that's the reason I stopped tagging and became the, uh, legend."

"You were imprisoned?" Her upper lip trembles. I'd go at her right then if I could, but I know she'd only push that button underneath her desk and then that'd be the end of my probation.

"Yeah," I said, and then, because I know it titillates them and gets them all wet, "and, well . . . you know how it is in prison . . . when you're young and . . . like, maybe kind of, uh, slender . . . not butt-ugly like some of the other dudes. . . ."

"Oh, my God," she said, a tear forming in one eye. "They didn't . . . *rape* you?"

I knew she'd be good for more than five bucks this time.

So, I'm all, "Well, Bobby, you are a genius when it comes to tagging,

but about life, dude, you're fucking dumb." I can say all this because our friends aren't really paying attention to us; they're roaming up and down the alley and making notes on the different pieces, taking pictures even. "A fat dude and a thin dude and a Porsche, that don't make E. T. in a starship."

"You're wrong, Todd," says Bobby. "Look at what it says on the rear of the car. Will you just look?"

"It says, 'Porsche.'"

"Bitch!" he whispers. "Porsche, right. *P-r-o-s-c-h-e* don't spell Porsche."

"So I'm dyslexic." I'm getting ready to punch him one because I don't like to be reminded that I don't read too good. "Ain't my fault. What's your point?"

"It's a fake, you fool. They're trying to blend in, but they copy us damn near perfect, but little things slip by . . . they're careless. They don't dot their i's and cross their t's. Hey, like, when the fat one comes back, take a good look at his hands. You won't need to read for that."

The fat one waddled back into view at that moment. He was stuffing his camera back into a jacket pocket. He had six fingers on his right hand. *That* scared me.

The sixth finger, the one beyond the pinky, wasn't even a real finger at all, but a kind of claw. I thought I saw scales. "Don't be afraid," said the fat alien. I wondered if he'd read my mind. "We're not going to do anything to you. We're only going to watch. If you please us . . . and I know you will . . . there could be rewards . . . wealth . . . journeys beyond your wildest imaginings . . . sexual fulfillment. Our fingers are in many pies."

"I only got two things in life I really have a hard-on for," Bobby said. "And one of them's only, like, a fantasy."

"And they are?" said the undertaker alien.

"I want to tag the moon. And I want to die."

I still remember the first time Bobby tried to commit suicide; he's about twelve and there's a drive-by on his street and four people get killed; one of them's Smiley, who never smiled. After Smiley's funeral, Bobby's at his house and he's all trying to hold his breath until he turns blue, but his stepdad beats him, so he has to breathe so he can cry.

Dr. Yao tells me about the value of human life, the tragedy of throwing it away; and I'm all, "Fuck you, Margaret, how can you talk about value and shit, you're the ones who put a price tag on everything," and she says, "I'm not talking money, I'm talking intangible values . . . *higher* values . . ." and I'm all, "When you're like me and Bobby, there *ain't* no value higher than money. A kid'll rape you cause his dick needs a

quenching. He'll fucking *kill* you for a pack of smokes. They don't teach you that in Tarzana, but you'd learn it on the street pretty damn fast. To be worth something you have to be worth something to somebody."

Dr. Yao mutters something about nihilism, and I tell her, "But when you're up on that wall, and the whole world knows you exist and you have a name and your name cries out over the chaos of the city . . . that's when, at least, you're somebody. For a while. Before they drag you away and bury your ass forever behind some prison wall."

She likes that. I think she's finally gonna let me do her.

What the two aliens have in mind is more than just sitting back and watching, though. They sort of want to participate. They want Bobby to go on the wildest tagging spree of his life, and they want to record all of it. And like, they want me along too, although maybe it's because Bobby's insisting on it. I'm like the crusty old commentator who's seen it all a million times . . . they want my ancient wisdom. After all, I have a lofty vantage point. I'm twenty-four years old and I've done time. I can't decide if the aliens are making a documentary of some kind or whether they're just whacking off on our adrenaline.

Bobby'll be sixteen soon and then it better all be over. Or else they'll catch him and try him as an adult and send him to a *real* jail where they'll buttfuck all the dreaming out of him forever.

So like, we all pile into the Porsche that's not a Porsche. Inside it's all different . . . a lot bigger, for one thing, because, the fat one tells me, space is all spindled up and twisting across itself like the strands of the writing we do; there's rooms within rooms and chambers within chambers. There's a room that turns into any place in the universe. There's a room with creatures preserved in columns of clear bubbly fluid. There's control panels and whirling lights and all that sci-fi stuff you see in movies. But you get the feeling that it's not what's really there at all, that it's like a virtual reality projection or something, because sometimes the images are weirdly superimposed or blur at the edges . . . and you feel it's all there only to prove to me and Bobby that these dudes are from another world . . . and that to them the place looks a whole lot different, or maybe doesn't *look* at all.

And sometimes it's just a little sports car jamming down the road, too small for four people. "Where to?" says the fat dude, and Bobby's all, I don't know, testing them, I guess, "Maybe like, the top of the Capitol Records tower." And in a moment the Porsche's lifting off and we're up above Hollywood, and I look down and I can see it all: the lights, the filth, the pimps, the tourists, the burger wrappers fluttering in the Santa Ana wind like sagebrush in the desert . . . the stars above, where the aliens come from, you can barely make out through the layers of smog,

but the stars in the sidewalk are bright enough to substitute for them . . . we rise up and no one sees us, or if they do they don't think there's any wizardry to it; after all, this is Hollywood, where all cars fly. We thread down Hollywood and sometimes we duck into side streets. A homeless man peers at us from inside a dumpster. Maybe, living closer to the hard real world, he can still see the wonder in a car that flies and has aliens in it.

We soar up to the Capitol needle and Bobby hangs from the window by a bungee cord and writes, *Nova Nova Nova Nova Nova*, in a frieze around the topmost edges of the building. We veer up toward the Griffith Observatory and Bobby tags the dome with a thousand-colored starburst. We zoom down to the Hollywood sign and now it has *Nova Nova Nova* painted along the side of each massive letter. We skim along Mulholland Drive and Bobby hits up the side of the Santa Monica mountains, burning *Nova* into the brush with some kind of disintegrator beam. We head south and Bobby's up on every one of those towering Jap banks that own our city. We go toward the sea and Bobby tags the beach from high overhead with a kind of laser gun pencil device that fuses the sand into a hundred glassy repetitions of *Nova Nova Nova Nova* and a hundred starbursts. The aliens love it. They've stuck a transmitter in Bobby's brain and they're getting off on his joy, and even I can feel it because I know what it's like to shout your name in man-tall letters from the tops of buildings and the heights of overpasses . . . I know what it's like to make the whole city that never fucking listens and never fucking cares sit up and stare me in the face and pay attention and know that I exist.

Tonight, they're *all* sitting up all right. The undertaker alien flicks a switch and we see a TV screen image hovering in the air. The airwaves are full of us. It's a gang, they're saying. A mega-gang that's decided to hit up every part of the city all at once. There's an expert on tagging on CBS now, explaining that NOVA is the initials of the New Order of Victorious Armies, some kind of neo-Nazi group . . . yeah, right, that really cracks us up . . . NBC says that as many as five hundred taggers are on the move . . . a phone hot line number is flashing on the screen . . . they've preempted "Murphy Brown." That's how fucking important we've become, two worthless street kids from beside the San Fernando railway tracks.

They give us anything we want, these aliens. Me and Bobby, we've both downed a couple of forty-ouncers by about three in the morning, and we're pissing out of the windows onto the deserted streets. The experts on the TV are all explaining the different gang initials now, and there's like this psychiatrist who's all talking about alienated youth and street violence and all those other things they don't know shit about.

There's cop cars patrolling now. They're looking for us. But the aliens

cloak the flying Porsche in a cloud of pseudo-smog, and we don't show up on radar either, and anyway we're just too fast for them.

But by four in the morning Bobby's all sick of this shit. He's all, "This ain't tagging, there ain't no excitement to it, it's just high technology, there ain't no *mystery* . . . no *danger*. We just go someplace, I hit it up, we push buttons, and then we escape. Fuck this, I'm a go home now."

The aliens look at each other. The fat dude says to me, "I don't understand. I thought we were giving him . . . you know, the maximum adrenaline high. What can we do?" The undertaker takes a handful of pills out of the glove compartment, I don't know, some kind of uppers I guess. Bobby just stares at them.

"You don't get it," I tell the aliens. "You tell me that you do this kind of thing yourselves, that you write your names all over like *planets* and shit, you write your names in little strings of amino acids and *we're* nothing but your signature crawling over what would have been a dead world . . . but you don't seem to see that writing *big* isn't what makes it important. You've let Bobby write all over L.A. and you've let him stir up the city and upset a lot of people and there's black and whites all over town chasing us, but that ain't what it's about at all."

Right now, understand, we are parked on top of the Beverly Center, right next to the big Hard Rock Café sign, which flashes on and off and alternately makes Bobby's face white as a ghost and shadowy as death. The aliens confer with each other in whispers, in some foreign language . . . sounds kind of like Japanese . . . and then the tall one says to me, not at all jokingly, "So illuminate us, wise one."

So I knew something about these two aliens: they looked up to me, like the kids who used to cluster around me on the corner of Jackman and Hubbard all them years, repeating the stories about me until even I couldn't recognize them any more. At twenty-four, I was a has-been. I had passed through the fire and been burned alive and lived, kind of, even though it was only a kind of half-living. So maybe, like, these aliens *were* a couple billion years old. They still hadn't gotten to the has-been stage. They couldn't see beyond themselves yet. And so I had something to teach them.

And that, to me, is a wonder in itself, and it's a fact that starts to bring me out of the death I'm in, the death I've sentenced myself to. And like, this is what I say to them: "The sociologists, the analysts, they all think the kids do this because their world's a terrible place . . . their daddies beat them and their homies kill them and they're stoned out of their minds and hanging themselves every five minutes . . . but that's not true. They don't do it *because* of those things . . . they do it *in spite* of them. They're like the corpse that thrusts its undead arm out through the soil and grabs you by the leg as you're walking through the graveyard.

They're dead, all the way dead, dead inside, and still they can't let go of life."

"So what are we to do?" says the undertaker, while Bobby twitches his bony fingers, waiting.

"You let him go, dude," I say. "You follow him at a distance, but you don't chauffeur him to where he wants to write, and you don't pluck him away when he's done."

"But," says the fat one, "what about the authorities? The LAPD's out in force by now. They think there's an army out there, a *Nova* gang. What if they catch Bobby?"

"He's already thought of that," I say.

Sometimes my sister comes back from a trick, and she don't give me all the money. She buys flowers and she lays them on a grave at Forest Lawn. It ain't Bobby's grave, but she says it's the thought that counts.

She don't talk to me that much anymore; I guess she thinks I killed him.

It's 4:30 in the morning and the jet-black Porsche lands on a knoll in Forest Lawn lightly, like a baseball cap in the wind. Bobby slips out. He knows his way around here; we've spent more than enough time among the dead people, getting stoned together, thinking about our friends who've been shot and can't afford a resting place like this, considering our own deaths too, wondering how soon they'll be. The moon is full and the grass is silver-black, and there's monument after monument . . . it's a peaceful place, the stones all clean and orderly, nothing like the hood.

There's, like, this humungous Grecian temple thing that looms up out of the grass, I think it's a memorial to some movie mogul. As me and the aliens watch, Bobby shimmies up an Ionian column and puts up *Nova* with a Mean Streak and a few deft flicks of his bony wrist. We see him on a dozen TV screens inside the Porsche that's a spaceship, and we even hear him breathing, amplified, Dolby surround-sound, muttering to himself like, "Fuck you for being dead, fuck you," and now, suddenly, we hear the chopper way overhead and see the search beams crisscrossing in the dark, and there's Bobby, hung on a cross of light . . . and we hear sirens. And alarms. Black and whites around here somewhere. We don't see them yet. They're just around the bend of the hill probably.

"Come on, dudes," I say, "pull up, grab him," and the Porsche peels out through the grass but Bobby doesn't get in the car, instead he starts sprinting downhill, in the direction of the freeway.

We follow, and the cop cars follow but they don't go on the grass because, like, this is Forest Lawn . . . this is a place for *rich* dead people . . . no tire tracks on *these* people's grass or it's lawsuit city . . . we

see Bobby run . . . a tiny stick-figure now, leaping over gravemarkers, pausing to tag on the brow of a marble angel with outstretched arms, then running again . . . closeup of his face hanging in the air in front of me and his face is so composed, so serene, it scares me.

"The indexes are way up," says the fat alien. "This is going to be a fabulous recording after all."

"I told you," I said. "Just leave him be and you'll get everything you want."

We follow him. He hops a wall and hits the pavement running. We follow. The cop cars follow. They're on Glendale, diverting traffic. The chopper's not police, it's fucking news. Bobby dodges the search beams. And suddenly he's gone.

"Where the—" says the undertaker alien.

"The overpass," I say.

There's no traffic at all on this stretch of the freeway because they've diverted everything to the 5 or the 101. There's one particular overpass where they all jumble into the 134. There's like fourteen lanes converging and diverging and above them is a row of bright green signs with big white names and numbers on them . . . my guess is that we'll see Bobby there. We hurdle the blockade and we blend into the convoy of police cars that surrounds the overpass. Bobby's on his hands and knees, hugging the signs, and he has a can of green paint in one hand and a can of white in the other and he's writing, over and over, *Nova, Nova, Nova*, and the starburst two-handed, covering the old legends with the green while writing his tagger name with the white.

They're shouting to him over the PA system. They say give yourself up, throw down your weapons, all that bullshit. There's reporters with video cameras. The Santa Ana's howling and through it there's the thrum of the helicopter. There's snipers with rifles trained on Bobby. An ambulance is pulling up. Me and the aliens, we get out of the Porsche. No one sees us because we are still cloaked in smog. We look up at where Bobby's writing.

On the signs, there's no more route numbers, no more *Burbank*, no more *Pasadena*, no more *Ventura*, *Los Angeles*, *Golden State Freeway* . . . no, all the signs read *Nova, Nova, Nova* . . . all roads lead to *Nova*. And he's all standing on top of the sign that once said *Pasadena Freeway*, balanced on the thin edge of the sign, his arms raised toward the moon . . . and even that spells *Nova*, the *N* a twisted ribbon of steel, the *O* the moon, the *V* himself with his arms up, the *A* scrawled across the concrete in black paint . . . he's made the whole city part of his name . . . even the moon itself . . . he's made himself bigger than the world.

"What's he trying to say?" the fat alien says.

And I'm all, "He's telling us who he is. The only way he knows how. Living in spite of himself. Like I told you."

I guess they gave up trying to divert the traffic because somehow it's started up again, there's eighteen wheelers and buses and a few passenger cars now, filling the freeway except for the island of cop cars right beneath where Bobby's standing.

In the moonlight, Bobby Donahue smiles. His thin pale body's all wrapped in the moon's radiance and even from down here I see that his eyes are shining. He's all standing there, poised in the moment of childhood's end, between innocence and disillusion, and he has a grace and a beauty that no one but another tagger can understand; he's fulfilled, he's in balance. For the first time since he burst out screaming into the world of pain, he loves himself. He is free.

And then they shoot him down.

Today Margaret Yao actually has a copy of the *National Enquirer*. I don't know how she's managed to pay for it at the checkout without dying of embarrassment. Maybe she went in disguise.

The headline reads: *NEW EVIDENCE OF LIFE ON MOON*.

The photo, computer-enhanced and obviously retouched, shows what looks like a word, scratched in letters a hundred miles long in the lunar dust . . . *Nova*.

Bobby Donahue never hits the ground. My sister says I killed him and doesn't talk to me. She always liked him, even in junior high.

. . . "But," Dr. Yao says, "you're telling me that . . . when people finally get to the moon to investigate . . . they might even find, I don't know, fragmentary DNA segments . . . something that could one day evolve into. . ."

I tell her I don't want to sleep under the overpass anymore. I ask her if her bed in Tarzana's big enough for two. She smiles wryly. She is in love, I think; I just don't know if it's me, or merely what I stand for.

I sat scrunched up in the back seat as the aliens' car sped over the sleeping city. I said, "Where is he? What have you done to him?"

And they said, "Given him every honor due to him."

I watched the comet streaking, only it wasn't a comet because it burned a swath through the smog itself on its way up toward the moon.

And I said, "I don't get it. If you guys are such galactic big shots, why do you even bother to come here?"



And they said, "You might call it something like revisiting the scene of the crime . . . now and then we like to observe our handiwork."

"But . . . if you really are these badass aliens from another world . . . why don't you just swoop down out of the sky in your true forms, do the whole 'take me to your leader' thing? Why do you hang out with white trash like us? Why do you try to look like humans, even down to our cars? Don't you have anything better to do than to imitate us?"

The fat alien laughed for the first time. I felt they were making fun of me, treating me like a little kid. That was strange, since only an hour before they'd acted like I was a dope ass OG motherfucking guru grand master and like I knew all the secrets of the universe.

The tall alien patted me on the back and said, "You have it all backward, Todd; we're not imitating you at all. *Au contraire*. It's just that—"

The fat alien said, "We made you in our image."

They left me on the hillside, freezing my butt off in the Santa Ana wind, and soared way way up in the direction of the sunrise. ●

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## NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 124)

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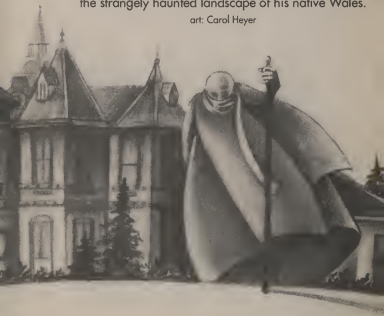


# THE OLD MAN OF MUNINGTON

David Redd

David Redd is a civil engineer who's since 1966 has contributed stories to *Interzone*, *F&SF*, and other magazines. His first story for *Asimov's* is a tale set in the strangely haunted landscape of his native Wales.

art: Carol Heyer



The old man was huge and slow, coming out from the rear yard of Manor of Munington into the kitchen garden, yet he did not seem frail. Rather, he gave an impression of great bulk and solidity, having stooped to come out through the doorway onto the black cinder path, with his dark grey cloak swirling about him as he moved. Ashes crunched beneath his boots. His face seemed round and fleshy, what could be seen of it behind the trailing woolen scarf which masked his nose and mouth against the chill November air. His skin had the unhealthy smooth pallor of some fungal growth, yet his eyes were wide and sparkling like dark water in moonlight.

This was his outward appearance, this was how he allowed the outside world to perceive the Old Man of Munington.

His chauffeur, a smaller and slighter figure following behind, wore the peaked cap and leather gloves which were all that people ever remembered of his appearance. Without his uniform, the chauffeur could have walked in the village and been thought a stranger.

"Shall we take the Bentley, sir?"

They spoke in English, for the cleaning girl from Llandygoch might be able to hear, from within the kitchen.

"In a moment, Digby. Let me think awhile."

The Old Man paused. It was now mid-afternoon, and the workers from the Establishment would not be returning for another two hours. He felt himself impatient to speak with Maximilian, yet impatience was itself a danger when plans had to be measured in decades or longer instead of mere hours. The decision soon to be made must not be made hastily.

Beside the path, in the bare brown earth of the cabbage patch, misshapen stalks still stood where sprouts had been picked months before. The Old Man could smell the faint sulphurous odor of their frost-darkened stems. A few yards further, past the compost heap with its blanket of mouldering weeds, the boundary hedge was bright with red clusters of hawthorn berries. Over the hedge between patchwork fields was the river Mwldan, spreading out to the nearby sea. All these things were natural, thought the Old Man.

Yet the thing which Maximilian and the man Harker were perfecting at the Establishment was in no way natural. Most assuredly it was the enemy of all things natural, of red berries and the sea, of men and other things. And this was why the Old Man needed time to think, because soon he would find it necessary to act. He knew something which Maximilian Wolf did not: last month, October 1951, the Americans had commenced designing a similar device at Los Alamos.

"I must speak with Maximilian," he said. That much was imperative.

"When he comes home here, sir?"

"No, I'll not wait. He'll stop in Llandygoch for some purchases, no doubt—he likes being among these people. We can intercept him there, before he wastes more time."

"Very good, sir."

The chauffeur glanced toward the kitchen window. The Old Man shook his huge head.

"I presume Gaynor is still busy in there." Which meant, of course, that they could not speak freely until they were in the car. "To the Bentley, then, Digby."

"Yes, sir. The garage is open."

The Old Man resumed his progress down the path of black ashes, toward the former stone barn which now housed his automobiles. His mind was still active, still turning over the possibilities.

"I need to know more, Digby. There must be some personal factors we have missed in our inquiries. Tell me again about this man Harker, and about the girls. . . ."

Within the kitchen, Gaynor Evans was drying the last of the wineglasses. She had closed the top window to keep out the draught, and she had heard nothing.

## 2

"Why does Uncle Ken read stories like that? It's horrible!"

Jenny, aged ten, came excitedly into their bedroom where her sister Nancy, eleven, had got straight down to her homework. Jenny had been reading the big black book in Ken Harker's study again, the book with a picture of a bat on the cover. Their aunt was cooking dinner for when Uncle Ken came home on the blue bus from Aberpoeth, and was trusting the girls to settle down by themselves after school. Jenny, naturally, had dumped her leather satchel and gone to resume her investigations into Uncle Ken's strange little library. Nancy sighed, with all the maturity of her extra year.

"Jennifer! You shouldn't be going in there!"

"Well, nobody's ever said I couldn't. But it *was* horrible!"

Jenny flopped down on her bed, on the multicolored quilt which Aunt Hattie had knitted from oddments of wool during the war, and ran her fingers through her auburn curls. She felt sickened by the brief story she had just read, and also a little frightened by her own feelings.

"Jenny," said Nancy patiently, "I've got equations to do, and I don't want to have to ask Uncle Ken about them again."

"There was this man, and he could hear footsteps behind him, and he could feel this other person coming closer—"

"Like the feelings *you* get?"

"Well, not quite, but he could feel someone coming up behind him, and then this someone pushed into his body and went *right through him!*"

Jenny was still trembling with the memory of it, but as she spoke she realized how ridiculous it must sound. Clearly, Nancy thought it sounded ridiculous too, because she was grinning at Jenny.

"So what? It's only a story—things like that don't really happen. Yesterday you were reading about vampires. I wish you'd stop!"

"But it's the only way I can find out about these things."

Jenny knew it was her own fault for looking at Uncle Ken's books anyway, as they weren't meant for children. Nancy was simply gazing at her, in that superior self-assured grown-up way she always used to make Jenny feel small. Under that gaze, Jenny could feel the frightenedness and the bubbling weirdness gradually fading away. She knew Nancy was right, as usual. Without Nancy saying another word, Jenny gave in to the old arguments.

"All right, I shouldn't have read his books. Let's go for a walk instead."

"After my piece of homework here. And we'll have to be back before dinner!"

"We could buy some sweets in the shop, or look for this week's Kitty Hawke comic?"

There was no answer from Nancy, bending over her mathematics once more. Jenny sat back on the bed and drew up her legs, hugging her knees. Life was very strange, she thought, wondering why Uncle Ken liked to read about horrible things. He didn't seem that sort of person, not when she saw him putting his arm around Aunt Hattie or digging the garden or playing snakes-and-ladders with her and Nancy. And she hadn't noticed these books in the old house, either; it was only since they'd moved down here last year that she'd started finding them. Perhaps they were simply easier to find after the move, or perhaps she was looking harder for them now.

Jenny knew why she herself wanted to read stories of dark things: it was the only way she could learn anything about the strange feelings that came over her sometimes, when she was with certain people.

When Jenny had first read about vampires, she had felt that she almost had the answer.

Perhaps the details about sleeping in coffins and drinking blood and only coming out at night were exaggerations, and the real vampires were simply ancient long-lived creatures which dwelt secretly among human beings and preyed on them. Perhaps.

Jenny had tried other ways of finding explanations for her feelings, by asking Aunt Hattie, and even asking Uncle Ken or the vicar once or twice, but the grownups always dismissed her feelings as just feelings, nothing more. They didn't understand. Only Nancy could sympathize, Nancy now busy with her head bent over her exercise book, but it was only sisterly sympathy without really knowing what was happening. Nancy could not feel the strangeness the way Jenny could. This was one of the worst parts about losing both their parents in the air raids, this not having a mother or father who could share her feelings and explain things to her. Even Aunt Hattie, her mother's sister, was never close enough to her for that.

Jenny waited for Nancy to finish her homework. Then they could go

for a little walk in the lanes around Llandygoch, and talk over everything between themselves.

From downstairs, she heard the clatter of Aunt Hattie putting a saucepan on the range.

As she calmed down, and the effect of that last story faded, she wondered again why Uncle Ken read them. He didn't have any feelings of strangeness to try to understand, she was sure. So why read tales of mystery and horror? Yesterday, after Jenny had read the story about vampires and had wanted to keep a cross in the bedroom, Nancy had said Uncle Ken read stories for the same reasons as everyone else did, for fun, to relax, to take his mind off work. But Jenny wondered what work was he doing in the Establishment now, for tales of dreadful horror to seem like a relaxation?

"Oh, hurry up with that maths, Nancy! Let's go out before it gets dark!"

### 3

The village of Llandygoch lay on the lower part of a hillside, above the river, at the center of a spider-web pattern of lanes and farm tracks. "Take the upper lanes, Digby," the Old Man had said. "Drive slowly." So the long grey Bentley had cruised in a leisurely manner between the high overgrown hedgebanks of the fields, frequently halting for the Old Man to haul himself out from the passenger seat and gaze down upon the roofs of Llandygoch from a convenient gate.

While leaning upon this gate or that, he would get Digby to go over the facts concerning Kenneth Harker yet again. The Old Man would murmur to himself, pondering the problem, while, upon the pastures below, black-and-white cows huddled in the shelter of the hedge. It was late afternoon, and the air was growing cold. Thin columns of smoke trailed upward from the chimneys of Llandygoch. His eyes followed the smoke downward to one particular roof, where in an hour or two Kenneth Harker would be arriving home from his work. Digby had pointed out that roof a short while ago.

The pattern was not yet complete, thought the Old Man. He needed more details about the project and particularly about Kenneth Harker.

He was no longer sure that Maximilian was the best person to provide those details.

Time passed, while the sun descended slowly over the western hills of Cnappan above the estuary, and the Old Man stood musing at the gate. He saw the roofs and gardens. He saw the crumbling walls of Llandygoch Abbey, a ruin since its closure at the Reformation four hundred years earlier. He saw evening shadows lengthening. He recalled standing here on long afternoons during the recent war, making plans for using what influence he had, feeling frustration that these people would not behave like reasonable beings.

Presently, he saw the movement for which he was waiting. In the

middle street, two small figures appeared, from the cottage now owned by Kenneth Harker.

The two girls wore brown coats and fawn headsquares, looking like twins at that distance. The Old Man watched them until he was sure which path they were taking. Then he turned back to the Bentley and motioned to Digby.

"They are going along the Longhouse road. We shall go back down as far as Pentre, and wait."

"Yes, sir. And Mr. Maximilian?"

The Old Man shook his head. "We shall see." He did have genuine admiration for the way in which Digby, after years in his role, could convey the most subtle shades of meaning through the most innocuous of words. Mr. Maximilian was indeed becoming a question. But first, there were Harker's two nieces to be investigated.

At the turning to Pentre, the lane had been widened in rough stone as a pull-in for lorries. Digby brought the Bentley in by the milkstand fashioned from old railway sleepers, which bore the farm name roughly burnt into the timber. The Old Man got out and stood staring at the name in silence. He remembered this farm from earlier days when men had been dividing the fields with hedges. There had been problems in those days too, but they had been different problems.

He was still gazing at the burnt lettering, in the grey light of evening, when the two small girls came up the lane.

Very slowly, the Old Man turned to look at them. He had heard their footsteps slowing down as they approached him. Digby was still in the Bentley as he had arranged, behind the wheel to show that the chauffeur knew his place. The Old Man did not intend that the girls should be frightened in any way.

He raised his hat slightly to them, in a deliberate and unhurried gesture.

"Good afternoon, young ladies. You know my name, I believe?"

Of course they did, for he was careful to be a familiar sight around the village and town. The slightly taller of the two answered him, her roundish face taking on a pleasant smile as she spoke: a well-brought-up child, he judged.

"Oh yes," she was saying, "you're Mr. Claude Munington, from Manor of Munington over the hill. It's a lovely big house."

The other girl had thinner features, and seemed oddly pale. She did not speak, or smile.

"So you know me and my house. You have lived here about a year, but we have not met socially. I believe you were in the Memorial Hall for the Brains Trust last month?"

"Yes. Uncle Ken was on the panel—I mean our uncle, Mr. Harker."

"I was there." He had accepted the collection on behalf of the hospital. One of the many duties, formerly necessary, which were now becoming a hindrance. It was time he retired from public life and did no more than



contemplate the line between earth and sky, as now. He returned his attention to the girls: the questions must start. "What are your names?"

"I'm Nancy, and this is my sister Jennifer. Jenny."

"I am very pleased to meet you both. I understand that your uncle works with my—ah, young cousin, Maximilian Wolf." They both nodded, fawn headsquares bobbing up and down. "Maximilian speaks most highly of your Mr. Harker. I understand that your uncle and aunt have brought you up. He was most fortunate in being able to afford Coneygar Cottage when he moved here."

"Oh, it was my money," said Nancy unexpectedly. "He's keeping it in trust for me, after our parents were killed."

"Ah. I see." This was not something he would have asked, but it did show that Mr. Kenneth Harker was a responsible man, as indeed the Old Man had already judged on previous evidence. "Your inheritance is being administered in trust for you two."

"No, just for me. Jenny was too young when they died."

Jenny spoke for the first time. "They hadn't changed the will. I'd only inherit if anything happened to Nancy."

A curious arrangement, but merely one more example of mankind's ability to complicate the business of life. It was unimportant. He must not become sidetracked by childish chatter. Carefully he leaned back against the milkstand, which creaked despite his caution, and stooped toward them slightly so that he would not seem so extremely tall compared to their young figures.

"I am sure your uncle will provide for you both. He will have only the kindest of thoughts for you, no doubt."

"Oh yes, he reads horror stories, but he isn't like that at all. He's nice, and Aunt Hattie is. We love them both."

At this silence fell, while the Old Man realized that he had learned something neither Maximilian nor Digby had told him, this taste in reading. His instinct told him that here was an important aspect of human psychology, one which he needed to consider more deeply. Distantly, he heard rooks cawing from the vicarage trees.

"We'd better be going," said Nancy. "We'll have to be back for dinner, before Uncle Ken comes home."

"Of course. However, we will meet again soon, no doubt. It is time your uncle came to visit Manor of Munington, you too, now that you have all settled into the village. I shall speak to Maximilian about an invitation. Good-day to you, young ladies."

As they turned back along the way they had come, he saw that the younger girl still appeared unhappy, her face extremely pale. She had been no use to him. The other girl though, Nancy, could well be most informative. He would have to speak to her again, when there was no pressure of time to limit his questions. That was something he could arrange with or without Maximilian.

Certainly he would have to bring their uncle to Manor of Munington very soon. This situation needed to be resolved swiftly.

He returned to the passenger seat of the Bentley. Digby looked at him inquiringly. "Any progress, sir?"

"Perhaps. I was not aware of Mr. Harker's tastes in reading matter."

"The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Radio Times*, sir. And the scientific journals which Mr. Maximilian knows about."

"There is more. We will talk about this later. Take me back to the manor for now."

"Didn't you intend meeting Mr. Maximilian, sir?"

"Not now. Let him follow his usual pattern of visiting shops and finding a drink or two. Time enough to speak to him later." And as the Bentley moved away smoothly, preparing to reverse in the farm entrance, the Old Man added, more to himself than to Digby, "I do not think he will have had any success with Harker."

4

A little earlier that afternoon, Maximilian Wolf had become aware that Kenneth Harker had left the laboratory. Perhaps this was the moment to approach the man.

Outside, a cold sea breeze was blowing over the huts and lawns of the Aberpoeth experimental facility. Max pulled his black greatcoat about him more tightly, and strode down the concrete path toward the proving shed. He recalled Harker telling him recently that he could work out problems better in a few moments of quietly gazing out to sea than in several hours of racking his brains over a laboratory bench. If Max knew anything about people, he knew where to find Harker now.

He went along the side of the corrugated-iron Nissen hut that was the proving shed. There were no windows in its curving sides, only double doors at each end. Max reached the far corner, where the ground fell away overlooking the sea, and there he found Kenneth Harker.

The man was leaning against the doors from which missiles would be wheeled out at times, or fumes would coil out from an engine on test. The profile of his lean face looked gaunt and withdrawn. His eyes seemed fixed on the horizon, or on his future. Max knew that the time had come for directness.

"Ken! I thought I'd find you here. Anything wrong?"

Harker turned his head slowly, as if reluctant to return his attention to everyday matters.

"Oh. Max, it's you. No, nothing's wrong. I came here for some peace and quiet, that's all."

Max had to ignore the hint. "Problems, Ken?"

"Only the one you know about. The chain reaction. I have proved that the test can go ahead."

"You proved that yesterday, Ken. Haven't you sent out the results yet?"

"I'm still checking them, but that won't take long. I'll send the report

out tomorrow—I get them asking for it twice a day now. That's not the problem."

"Then what is?"

He saw Harker frowning. Over his shirt, the scientist wore only a sleeveless knitted top, yet gave no sign of feeling any cold. Max had seen him similarly shut out physical sensation on other occasions when concentrating on overcoming technical difficulties, so now he must be concentrating with equal singlemindedness upon the moral difficulty which faced him.

"Max," said Harker, "I've been thinking very hard about what you said yesterday. About the risk that the hydrogen reaction, once initiated, would spread from the bomb into the water of the atmosphere and sea."

"I believe," said Max very carefully, "that it is a risk which you have to consider."

"You said, that peaceful sea out there could become ablaze like the Sun. Every living thing on this planet could perish."

"I did say that, as a possibility. It is rather more possible that your calculations are correct, and the reaction would be confined to the material of the apparatus itself."

Harker gave a brief nod. "Yes, Max. But you also said that I could never be wholly certain that I had considered every possibility. As long as there was a risk the chain reaction could spread, any risk at all, it would be better to report that the risk was too great, and say the tests should be canceled and the project abandoned. We shouldn't take risks with the future of the world, you said."

"I did say that. Is that what you came here to think about?"

"Oh no, Max. I've made up my mind."

"You have?"

"Yes. That was the easy part. The test can go ahead." Harker gave a sudden short laugh. "The difficult part was working out how to tell you, Max."

Maximilian Wolf pressed against the wall of the Nissen hut for support, in his sudden dismay and confusion. So Harker was determined to give this nation the ultimate weapon—

Max thought swiftly. He would have to inform the Old Man of this, and persuade him to take action.

## 5

For Jenny, one good thing about Llandygoch and the nearby town of Trefwldan was that both places were utterly safe at night. There were no bomb sites, no meths drinkers in alleys, no danger worse than being kept chatting on Mrs. Evans's doorstep past bedtime. So her aunt and uncle saw no harm in letting Jenny and Nancy go out for a walk which might last a couple of hours even in winter darkness, as long as they wrapped up warmly and promised not to go near the river. That was

very convenient tonight, when Jenny felt an imperative need to go investigating the Old Man of Munington.

The need had become urgent during the evening meal.

"Max invited me to dinner tomorrow," Uncle Ken had said, as they ate around the living-room fire. "You girls too, if you want to see the old manor-house. We must be getting accepted into village life these days."

Jenny had other thoughts, but did not voice them to her aunt and uncle.

"I can't put off my Red Cross," Aunt Hattie had said. "We're still catching up after the election. But you all go, dears. Enjoy yourselves. Well, well, first the Brains Trust and now an invitation to the Manor!"

Not one invitation to the Manor but two, and two in one day, Jenny had thought. An odd coincidence. She didn't believe in coincidences. She did, however, believe in the Workings of Dark Forces, especially after finding those books in Uncle Ken's study . . . and especially after being so close to the Old Man himself.

Jenny had never felt the feeling of *strangeness* running down her back as strongly as that afternoon when she had been standing before the Old Man of Munington, in the lane below Pentre farm. That feeling couldn't have been imagination, whatever the vicar might say, and anyway she wasn't going to ask *him* again, well-meaning though he had been.

The old house called Manor of Munington, she knew, was only half a mile along the lane from Longhouse. She and Nancy had walked past there several times.

So, as anyone could walk around Llandygoch and Trefwldan at night without fear, Jenny and Nancy said they were going out.

"Wrap up warmly, dears," said Aunt Hattie.

"Don't go near the river," said Uncle Ken.

The night outside was dark and starlit, although it was without the evening mists which sometimes made the lights of Trefwldan seem like a fairy city across the river. Instead Jenny could see the dark fields around her as she and Nancy walked up the lane toward Longhouse, and could see also the comforting twinkling shape of Orion the Hunter rising above the hill. His three-starred belt and bright shining sword were clear, although his lower stars were hidden by the brow of the hill. Further up: the seven sisters of the Pleiades, a friendly family who dwelt in her dreams amid a web of light. Being out under the night sky held no terrors for Jenny. Other things might frighten her, but not the night.

She and Nancy walked swiftly, as much to keep warm as to reach Munington quickly. Only once she heard a car, back in Llandygoch, which went away on a lower road towards Pulpit sands. At this time of night, most people were indoors listening to the wireless.

"There won't be many servants," said Jenny, thinking ahead to what they would do when they reached the Manor. "The chauffeur, the cook. Who else?"

"Didn't Mrs. Evans say there was a gardener?"

"Yes, but she said he only goes in during the day. Like her daughter who helps the cook."

"So we won't have many people to watch out for," said Nancy. "Only Maximilian, the grandson or cousin or whatever he is. A sort of second cousin twice removed, or something. I got lost in all those names she was telling us."

"Mrs. Evans wasn't too sure herself," said Jenny. "Not with so many of the old family moving away or going off in the war. I suppose that's why they don't need so many servants now."

"Or they can't get servants. The ones they have are all old." Nancy gave a soft chuckle. "Lucky for us, if they're all deaf as posts and can't hear us creeping in."

Jenny chuckled back, but she grew thoughtful at the prospect of entering Manor of Munington itself, and said no more for a while.

Orion's club was bright above his head, and so was the rim of stars that formed his shield, when they went past Longhouse and the hill leveled off. Between the hunter and the Pleiades, Jenny could see the glow of Aldebaran in the horns of Taurus. Lower down, an owl went floating past, as a white shadow, toward the barns of Longhouse, its only sound the whisper of its wings. Other birds, in the hedge, would make an occasional low cheep as the girls walked by. And after that the lane went downhill, and all of a sudden Jenny found herself approaching the grey stone pillars at the entrance to Manor of Munington itself.

"It didn't take long to get here," Nancy whispered to her. "We'll have at least an hour to scout about."

Jenny said, "I hope I don't get that feeling again," but she was determined to conquer it, and went first through the gate pillars toward the Manor.

As she walked down the rough drive, Jenny could see the pale stone bulk of the house through a few tall bare treetrunks ahead. Somewhere in there was the Old Man, who made her feel *strangeness*, who had invited Uncle Ken here tomorrow, and who . . . well, perhaps she'd been reading too many books from the study. There was nothing she could really say against him. But she needed to find out, which was why she was here, and why she had brought Nancy along to help. Jenny was sure of one thing: she never wanted to have to face the Old Man alone.

Now she could see the front porch with its columns, and the narrow small-paned windows on either side. One ground floor window had a light on, and so did a second-floor window under the eaves. The lights were soft, mellow, she noticed. They must be paraffin lamps rather than the electric.

"I can't see any way in at the front," she whispered to Nancy.

"Remember what Mrs. Evans said. Her Gaynor works in the kitchen. She gets in by a back door past the garage. Let's try it."

On their way around, Jenny tried to peer in through the lighted window, without going so near that she might be seen. It appeared to be a lounge. A high-backed leather chair, turned away from her, cut off most

of her view, but she could see the tall dark-haired figure of Maximilian Wolf, standing beside a cabinet where stood a decanter and glasses. He seemed to be talking to someone else, presumably someone sitting in the high chair.

Jenny felt cold. She felt shivery, uneasy.

Even at this distance, she could feel the presence of the Old Man inside that room.

With a shudder she turned, and followed Nancy past the garage to the rear gardens of Manor of Munington. Quickly, she explained what she had seen, and felt.

"So you felt it again. That proves it—we were right to come!" Nancy put an arm around her for a moment. "Come on. We'll get in and see what they're plotting for Uncle Ken."

"I don't know if they're plotting anything. I've just got a feeling. Nancy, I'm not very good at this Sexton Blake business. What if the back door's locked?"

It wasn't.

"It didn't matter if it had been locked," Nancy whispered to her. "I could have worked that top window open with a nail in two seconds. You learn a lot of things when you come up from the juniors."

Then they went inside.

Jenny went through the darkened kitchen very cautiously, arms spread forward and fingers outstretched, feeling for any tables or chairs which might have crockery balanced on them. It was very dark in here. Nancy was following, equally slowly; Jenny could hear her breathing but not her footsteps. In a cottage with creaking floorboards, the girls had learned to tread lightly. Jenny reached the door, feeling the linen of aprons hanging behind it, and closed her fingers upon the round door-knob. Slowly she turned it and eased the door open.

In the dark corridor, Jenny saw a line of light under a far door. That must be the living-room, where the Old Man was. Already she could feel that empty strangeness ahead, like a great block of ice freezing everything around it, could feel it from the small of her back right up to between her shoulders.

But if she wanted to hear what the Old Man of Munington was saying, she would have to go up to that door—

—put her head against the timber paneling—

—and listen—

Within the marble fireplace, the log fire crackled and flared. This wood from the fallen Scots pine was resinous and prone to sparks, but Claude Munington had a liking for the pleasant aroma of its smoke, slightly pungent to his nostrils. He settled his immense bulk further into the leather armchair, feeling the comfortable solidity of its iron inner frame.

He placed great store upon a sense of stability, something which Maximilian could never understand.

Yet in their disagreement now, he rather than Maximilian was the one arguing for change.

"Human society is no longer stable," he repeated. "The social order has changed much in recent years, and will change again."

Maximilian was frowning, standing against the side cabinet with the drink he had not yet touched.

"What do changes in human society matter? Our problem is with Harker. He either changes his mind, or dies. That project must not go any further!"

In his armchair the Old Man sighed. He had lived so long, and seen so many dwellers in this house wish to interfere in human affairs. The worst disagreements and the attendant crisis had come in the Great War, when much of his family had taken the path of action, and had gone away never to return. Their efforts had failed. Maximilian's efforts would fail. Maximilian did not seem to appreciate the one central lesson of history: human affairs were best left alone.

Of course, Maximilian was still young, still in his inquiring, wandering stage, and although he was indeed a distant relative of the family, he had not been brought up here, had not had the time to gain wisdom from the Old Man as he should have. Perhaps a different approach was needed.

"You know, Maximilian, we ourselves are at our most stable when we are adapting to change. Let me give you an example."

"If you must. It will not alter the fact that Harker must die."

"My example is the spread of the middle class, and the consequent parallel spread of the suburbs. New houses are being built on new estates, and new patterns of living are developing. We may not be able to populate one large house without arousing curiosity any longer, but many small houses may serve the same function. A family which has lost its large ancestral home may occupy some quiet cul-de-sac of a residential estate quite conveniently. Such a group of houses could be a modern equivalent of those wild isolated farms of Cnappan which no outsider ever visits, and could be as stable as them. So, by adapting to circumstances, we appear less intrusive than if we resist. Do you not see that, Maximilian?"

"You can't mean that we should let risks increase without taking action, surely. We have a clear duty to shape the events around us! Answer me one thing, if you will!"

"And what is that?"

"Can you stand by and see our dangers increase, and do *nothing*?"

"No. That is why I invited Harker here. I am glad that you also invited him. We do not fully understand him, you know. We must explore the reasons for his decision, and try to understand his mind. Then his motives will be clear."

This was a tedious argument, but one he had to go through. Digby had long since given up and retired to his bed. So had Cook.

Maximilian came forward. "And if you never understand him? If our talk with him tomorrow comes to nothing? Would you not take action then?"

"Perhaps."

Within himself, the Old Man knew that however reluctant he might be to act, when the moment came, he would do whatever was necessary, without hesitation.

And Maximilian, having opened the possibility of doubt, came forward again with the question which could not logically be refused.

"If you think there may be a need for action, won't you prepare for it?"

The answer the Old Man gave was inevitable.

"Yes."

"Then we must prepare for it now. Come to the lower chamber, now. What means would you suggest for disposing of him?"

"It must be natural. The sea-chest."

At last the Old Man began to move, to rise from his armchair.

"As you say, if there is a need for action, we should prepare for it. We shall go down, and make ready for tomorrow."

7

In the darkened corridor, Nancy was listening for sounds of movement, but it was Jenny, with her ear to the living-room door, who gave the warning first.

"They're coming!"

She pulled Nancy back along the corridor, to the only cover they knew—the kitchen door. There seemed to be a stairway along one side, but she didn't dare explore it. If they'd been more experienced in sleuthing, they'd have remembered to bring a torch, but neither of them had thought of it. Jenny got into the kitchen and just glimpsed light bursting into the corridor as Nancy pulled the door closed behind them.

In that brief moment of light, Jenny had seen the staircase, an end door which must lead into the hall or porch, and several other side doors. She tried to memorize what she had seen, at the same time listening for footsteps coming nearer.

And just as she had felt through all that time with her ear to the door, she felt that sense of cold strangeness, now almost overpowering.

A shuffling noise came: the Old Man was in the corridor. She couldn't hear any other steps, probably because the carpet would be muffling the sounds, as she'd found when trying to move lightly herself. Was he going to come into the kitchen?

There was a clicking sound, a door handle from a little distance away. Jenny felt herself becoming calmer, and realized with the surprise of self-discovery that she could actually sense that the Old Man was moving further away. (And perhaps Maximilian too, because he had given her



the same feeling on the times she had met him, although it had never been as strong as with the Old Man himself.)

"Nancy," she whispered. "We're all right. He's moving away. I can tell!"

"Thank goodness for that! What was he saying in there?"

For Jenny had done all the listening, while Nancy had kept guard on the corridor side, and Jenny hadn't dared pass on any news for fear of missing hearing something even more vital.

Swiftly, she explained the worst parts of what she had heard. "They say Uncle Ken's making some kind of a weapon, something too horrible to use. They want him to change his mind and stop it, I think, but I'm not sure. If he doesn't do what they say . . ."

"Oh, no! Where are they now?"

Jenny slid the kitchen door open a touch. In the corridor, a different door was giving out light now, half-open. Jenny opened the door the rest of the way.

"I think they've gone somewhere else. Let's look."

The "somewhere else" proved to be a flight of steps heading down underneath the living-room, lit by a modern electric bulb. So the wiring-up had started. That light meant that there would be no shadows to hide in. Jenny looked doubtfully at Nancy, but she knew that if she wanted to hear anything more she would have to go down the steps. Nancy nodded. At least Jenny could feel that the Old Man was not too near.

The steps were stone, well-worn, and around the next corner they were interrupted by a slate-flagged landing. A branching flight of steps led up again, to another corner, which Jenny found ended at a solid-looking timber door. The first flight went on down to yet another door, which again was partly open. Jenny put her hands to her head, trying to work out where all these steps and corridors and doors were in relation to each other. And the feeling was coming back, making things seem worse again. She had a sudden fear of what the Old Man might do if he sensed her presence.

"Nancy, I'm going to listen again. Can you keep watch at the landing?"

"No, I think I ought to be the one down by the door, Jen. I'm older."

"But Nancy, you can't tell when they're near. I can. I really can, that's how all this started. Let me go."

Her sister didn't like it, Jenny could tell, but at last she said, "All right. If you're sure," and went back to halfway up the stairs.

Jenny tiptoed to the half-open door. She trembled. A wave of cold uneasiness washed over her, and it was not from herself. She could not bring herself to look around the edge.

She and Nancy must have waited too long before coming down, because whatever discussion had been necessary seemed almost over. She could hear the low booming tones of the Old Man quite distinctly.

"I am not persuaded, Maximilian. I feel certain that Harker will make the correct decision. However, I agree that making provision for a final solution would be prudent."

The softer voice of Maximilian was more difficult to hear. Jenny could only make out a few words: "... the sea-chest... seem natural... drowning...."

Then the Old Man spoke again, with words which were clear even if their meaning was not.

"It will do. Digby can fill the chest with sea-water tomorrow. Now we have talked enough, Maxmilian. Let us go up for a last drink, and prepare for sleep."

Jenny thought, *Go up?*

"Nancy! Get out!"

Jenny called as loudly as she dared, and heard a slight scurry of feet above her. Immediately Jenny herself went rushing up the stone steps, feeling the strangeness in motion somewhere behind. In her rush she went straight through the top door, into the corridor, and along toward the kitchen. The darkness after the lighted stairway confused her, with after-images flashing around her.

It was a moment or two before she reached the kitchen door and realized that it was closed. Nancy was not with her.

Behind Jenny were heavy footsteps on stone, and a sense of the strangeness approaching. Where had Nancy got to? Where? With the feeling that the Old Man of Munington was about to see her at any moment, Jenny raced through the last two doors—leaving them closed behind her—and went from the kitchen out into the garden. Her feet crunched into cinders—the path—and she jumped aside to the softer earth. A cabbage stalk snapped under her foot, startling her into a gasp.

"Nancy! Oh, where are you?"

There was no answer. Gradually, Jenny understood that she was out under the stars, that the Old Man and Maximilian must have gone back to the living-room, and that Nancy must be trapped somewhere inside the square stone walls of Manor of Munington.

She would never tell anyone the way she felt now, in the dark, stepping off the vegetable patch, going back to the kitchen door. This was absolutely horrible. And trying to tiptoe on the doorstep, her shoe slipped slightly, being muddy from the garden, and immediately she could imagine the Old Man finding her trail of muddy footprints all through the house in the morning. Jenny breathed heavily, pulled off her shoes, and went back in her stockings into Manor of Munington. She hoped she would be able to pick up the shoes on her way back out, or else they would betray her as surely as muddy footprints would have done.

Going back through the kitchen was worse than the first time. She was still feeling her way in the dark, but now she was alone and worrying terribly about Nancy, and she knew that at any minute someone might come along to lock the doors for the night. These people probably had the country habit of an early bed to allow early rising in the morning. This thought made her so anxious and fearful she could hardly bring herself to re-enter the corridor. When at last she did, she found it as dark

as before, with only a tiny line of light under the living-room door. The other doors were all closed.

She stepped cautiously up to the door which she thought concealed the steps down, and tried the handle. It turned, but the door did not move. Luckily her fingers brushed against a key, unnoticed before, and this opened it.

The feeling was strong again, but that was because she was close to the living-room and its occupants, she hoped. She had to go down those stairs. If Nancy wasn't there, she might be on the upper staircase, or else she might have got into the living-room, either in hiding or dragged there by force. . . .

So down the stone steps she went, as silently as she could, down to the corner. She didn't know how to switch on the light, and thought she was probably safer without it. At the turning, she stopped.

She whispered, "Nancy?"

"Jen?"

In another moment, they were together. "You took the other steps?" Jenny hugged her sister with enormous relief, squeezing the breath out of them both. "Phew! Let's go."

Side by side, they hurried back up the steps.

"I heard them lock me in, Jenny. I couldn't get out. I was just trying the other doors when I heard you. That bottom room—I found a light switch—it's like an old torture chamber in there—"

Jenny told her to save it for later. There were things she'd overheard which she still had to tell Nancy, but the important thing now was to get out. The feeling was still strong. Quickly they took the same way back, closing all the doors behind them. Jenny was glad to leave the kitchen for the last time, thinking how easily someone could have locked the door with her trapped outside and watching helplessly from the vegetable patch. Only Nancy would have been able to open the window, but Nancy would have been locked away down on the stone stairway. The two of them had been so lucky to get out. At least Jenny knew that the risk of coming back had been worthwhile.

Outside the kitchen door, in the night which felt warm and comforting compared to the strange uneasiness she had felt within the house, Jenny retrieved her shoes and put them on. She even smoothed the trodden ground where she had stood in the vegetable patch.

"Clever girl," whispered Nancy approvingly. "You know, Jenny, you needn't have come back for me. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't. I'd have managed somehow."

"Oh no, I *had* to come back for you!"

Jenny could never have left Nancy in that place, no matter how bad the feelings became.

"I know. I've always said you'll get half when I'm twenty-one, you know."

"Nancy, I don't want it!"

The dark half-seen garden of Manor of Munington was no place for

this old argument. Jenny felt Nancy's arm on her shoulder. "Home, James, and don't spare the horses!"

They walked back still hand in hand, through the garden and past the garage and down the dreadfully long drive, until they were out on the lane and the feeling had quite gone from Jenny. On the black horizon, three miles distant, was the little red warning light which marked the observation tower of Aberpoeth. Above her, Orion and the sisters of the Pleiades were keeping watch. Familiar stars, old friends. They were with her all the way down past Longhouse, past Pentre, between the high hedgebanks, down to the lights of Llandygoch and so in through the gate of Coneygar Cottage itself.

"I was just beginning to worry about you," said Aunt Hattie.

"Sorry we're late," said Jenny.

"We had a nice walk up to Manor of Munington," said Nancy.

8

Maximilian Wolf slept badly that night, thinking he would have to act if the Old Man did not, and in consequence he was unable to concentrate fully at work the next morning. He did however spend the first hour usefully with Kenneth Harker.

Towards noon, he became aware that Kenneth Harker had been missing for an hour or more, and therefore he went searching for him.

Harker had retreated to the quiet sanctuary of an organic analysis bench. Max found him behind a row of burettes, their glass tubing clamped upright before him like a screen. He was writing in the familiar yellow-spined S.O. Book 127, a hard-covered foolscap jotter he used for all his project summaries; the book was an inch-thick 1938 version, not one of the slim narrow-feint wartime economy stocks which were all that Max had been issued. Max had learned to recognize these little status markers in the public service. He had learned too that when Harker took his fountain-pen to this book, another stage of some project was virtually over.

Max came around the shield of burettes and pulled up a stool beside Harker.

"Here you are, Ken. Have you thought any more about my suggestion?"

Harker paused, holding his pen an inch above the book.

"Max, I couldn't fail to think about it. A remote possibility, but as you say it must be considered. I've got young Jenkins combing the literature now."

"I'm glad to hear it. This may be a slight case of perfectionism on my part, as you would say, but we have a responsibility to cover every aspect of the problem."

Harker wrote down a few words, then looked up again.

"Do you realize, Max, your perfectionism has cost me another day? I

won't be able to document my final recommendations until tomorrow, thanks to you!"

"I am glad to hear that too," said Max. Very glad. This was what he had neglected his own work earlier on to achieve, this postponement of Harker's written decision until after tonight. Admittedly he had been forced to posit some fairly unlikely possibilities. His previous objections had not been enough, not quite. The need for cryogenic housing was a technical problem which would surely be overcome soon. Also, reports of some foreign experiment code-named George suggested that the danger of the reaction spreading was now so slight as to be negligible, although fortunately Harker lacked sufficient information to be absolutely sure. Max wished he could learn where this data had come from, but he knew that for security reasons neither he nor Harker would ever be told.

The restrictions of life among humans could seem so petty and pointless at times.

Max brushed a finger casually against the glass tap of the nearest burette while he considered whether or not he had done enough to create a delay. It seemed, on balance, that he had. He watched the gold nib sliding across the smooth paper, then stood up. "I won't disturb you any further, Ken. No doubt you need peace to collect your thoughts. Although, one thing, Ken—I take it that your acceptance of the invitation to the Manor tonight still stands? Pressure of work will not interfere?"

Harker's pen paused again. "No, I'm looking forward to the break, and to meeting your noble cousin." He chuckled suddenly at Max, as was his habit when ending a conversation. "And I'm sure my two nieces will enjoy visiting the Manor."

9

School had been almost unbearable for Jenny, long and tedious with far too much time to think. All day since the moment of waking up, she'd been recalling what she had heard the night before. She and Nancy had whispered to each other about it for hours after going to bed last night, but today they'd had no chance to discuss it. This term, Nancy had gone up to another school, being eleven, and Jenny had no one at break or lunchtime who could help, who could even be told. Jenny was never gladder to see the school bus at the end of the afternoon, and to see Nancy already up on the top deck.

There was no dinner at the cottage tonight, only a quick sandwich for them as well as for Uncle Ken, because tonight they were having dinner at Manor of Munington.

At least this gave Jenny time to make plans with her sister, except that they couldn't think of anything useful to do. Warning Uncle Ken not to go wouldn't work, they agreed. All they could do was tell all the neighbors exactly where they were going, for safety's sake. After that they could only wait.

Then, when the Bentley arrived—

"We're so excited," Nancy announced to the chauffeur. "We've told everyone we're having dinner at the Manor!"

Nancy paused, for Jenny to come in on cue, but all of a sudden Jenny found herself unable to speak. She felt as though she were leaning over a vast icy gulf, as though a great numbness were spreading up across her back. With an effort she nodded toward the little old chauffeur, even now turning to look at her.

"I've got that feeling again, Nancy. . . ."

"What feeling?" asked Uncle Ken, following them through the cottage gate in his demob suit. "Are you all right, my girl? You look pale."

"Just a headache," Jenny gasped. "I'll see if Aunt Hattie's got some aspirin."

It was what Aunt Hattie had given her before, when she had complained of feeling odd. It would be better than nothing. The thought of all the feelings of last night coming back, worse than ever, being at the Manor with its people, was making her queasy. She dashed inside, found her aunt, and was given two white tablets. Hastily, she swallowed them, washed them down with a cup of water, and returned outside to the car. Around her, the evening air seemed to hang heavily over the quiet village.

"Better now?" asked Uncle Ken. Nancy just raised her eyebrows, which meant the same thing.

"Not really," said Jenny. "I'll get over it. Can we go?"

"In you get," said Uncle Ken, and they all bundled into the back seat. He felt Jenny's forehead. "No temperature. Yes, you'll soon get over it." As the chauffeur started up, he went on, "Give the aspirin time to work. Remarkable stuff, you know. Acetylsalicylic acid. Chemically it is virtually the same as a substance found in willow bark, so perhaps there was a basis of fact in some of the ancient witches' brews."

Jenny sighed. Uncle Ken could never forget that he was a scientist. Never, unless when losing himself in his favorite horror stories, maybe. He was always telling her and Nancy more than they wanted to know.

The Bentley was carrying them swiftly up the lane toward the Manor—by headlights, for the night was already dark. In the yellow glow ahead, Nancy glimpsed the milkstand of Pentre where she had met the Old Man yesterday and felt the same disquieting presence as she felt around his younger cousin, Max Wolf, or around the chauffeur now.

Except that she couldn't sense the chauffeur any more.

The feeling had gone.

Uncle Ken was right. Aspirin was remarkable stuff. Maybe one day she would discover why—what had he said about witches' brews?—but meanwhile she was simply grateful that it worked. She began to feel that, despite her fears, she could face an evening with the Old Man of Munington.

And still keep clear-headed enough to see what he might try with Uncle Ken.

He saw their lights coming up the drive, and heaved himself out from the great reinforced armchair in the living-room to await his guests.

The Old Man had resisted the effects of aging longer than most of his kind, but now the long reach of time had advanced upon him. In previous years, he had disguised his longevity by simple deceptions, such as leaving for a while and returning later as his own nephew, but nowadays he could no longer assume the appearance of a younger person. His body was becoming stiffer, less mobile, settling with age into a pattern which was not of his choosing.

Any physical action tonight would have to be swift and without warning, to have any hope of success. Although the sheer weight of his huge body would give him some advantage.

He reached the porch and stood ready, still wrapped in the grey outdoors cloak, which made him seem even larger than he was. As the Bentley drew up, he opened the door and switched on the new electric lantern. By its light, he saw Digby letting out his passengers, the tall figure of Harker, the two small girls. Those two would be no hindrance to him. If anything, their presence might act as a restraint on Maximilian's occasional impulsiveness. He greeted them first, to maintain the old courtesies.

"Good evening to you, young ladies, Mr. Harker. I am so pleased that you could come."

As they murmured thanks, he stepped back, conscious that he must not allow his bulk to overawe them, not yet.

"Come inside. Let me show you around the house."

He ushered them forward into the main hall, where there were lights, and he spent several minutes pointing out in leisurely fashion the oak staircase, the wood paneling, the ancient portrait paintings and an even older suit of armor in one corner. These were things they would expect to see, things which would reassure them.

"The present Manor is relatively new," he informed them. "It was almost entirely rebuilt by John Nash in 1800, on the site of an earlier building." He remembered Nash well, a very capable young man.

Of the original building, nothing remained but the cellars.

"You must be cold after your journey. I will show you the rest of the Manor later. Let us make ourselves comfortable around the fire."

He had set the scene for the evening well enough. Now he ushered them into the living-room, toward the great fireplace with its blazing logs, where Maximilian was waiting.

For the next hour, he was the perfect host, making conversation, offering drinks—fresh milk for the girls—smiling as much as his huge ravaged face would allow.

Cook came in, Cook who was actually his sister, although no person in the village could have guessed it, and she brought in an excellent traditional meal of beef and vegetables. There were enough additional

culinary flourishes to imply that rationing had never restricted the Munington household in any way. Soon Kenneth Harker appeared to be thoroughly relaxed. The man was clearly at his ease, his nieces less so, although they seemed much less nervous than yesterday when the Old Man had spoken to them on the road. And Maximilian, for once, was taking pains to be genial and good company.

Maximilian and the Old Man, of course, had different objectives for the evening, although Maximilian did not know that yet.

The Old Man pondered while they ate.

There was a missing factor in his knowledge of Harker, something even Maximilian had not been able to tell him. He knew that Harker had an excellent scientific mind, and was trusted with information of the highest military security classification, but more individual details were still lacking. Harker had made several friends in Llandygoch since his arrival and he certainly joined in the village activities, although not quite to the same extent as his wife with her Red Cross and her Girl Guides. He was known to like macabre horror stories in his reading, but that was not too unusual. Yet somewhere in this picture of the man was some reason why Maximilian's attempts at persuasion had proved ineffective, some reason why Harker was so unshakable in his conviction that the hydrogen bomb project should go ahead. Was the fault in Maximilian's basic approach, or in his reading of human personality?

The Old Man continued probing under cover of light conversation, but he learned nothing useful until the meal proper was over.

Then the hint came almost by chance. A reference to the parents of the two girls, their deaths, the fact that an inheritance was waiting. Although Harker did not mention the finer details there, in front of the log fire, the Old Man happened to recall some words from yesterday, when he had met the girls on the road by Pentre.

They had said that the inheritance was for Nancy alone.

Only Harker could have told them that! And told them without caring what envies, what jealousies and divisions it might have caused between the sisters!

The Old Man had gained enough experience of human reactions to such things to realize what this fact told him about Harker. It was something to which Maximilian had been blind. This had to be confirmed, quickly.

"So the girls are provided for," he said, bringing an unusual warmth to his booming tones. He widened his lips in an approximation of a smile at the two round little faces, now pinkish from the warmth of the fire. "That is indeed good to know. I take it that a trust fund has been set up for them?"

Harker nodded; the man had allowed Maximilian to keep topping up his glass of port, ever since the first toast to the health of His Majesty, and he was clearly in a convivial mood.

"Yes, it's a trust for the two of them in effect—" Harker drained his



glass again—"although under the actual terms, Nancy is the sole beneficiary, as the legal chaps put it. That doesn't matter to me—I look after them both."

The Old Man looked at them with a beam which they might have mistaken for affection, rather than satisfaction.

He heard breath drawn in sharply. Maximilian must have realized the significance of all this.

"You're quite open!" said Maximilian. "Was that important to you, Ken, letting the girls know where they stand?"

"Yes, yes. It's a fact. I don't hide facts from anyone."

Before the Old Man could interrupt them, Maximilian went on, "Just as you won't hide the facts about the bomb from anyone, Ken?"

He had grasped it.

"That is work," the Old Man said firmly, to check any further indiscretions. "We do not wish to talk about work tonight, eh? We wish to forget our duties. And as your work has such a high security classification, both of you, we should not start the habit of discussing it. Walls have ears. Please, refill your glasses."

It had taken Maximilian this long to see the obvious. How many months? But at last he must be convinced that Harker would never alter his mind. The psychological pivot of the situation had been reached; at least one life would be ended tonight.

And indeed, very soon the Old Man found Maximilian turning the conversation to the subject of their cellar.

11

Jenny drew in breath. She needed to. Despite the heat of the living-room, a strange chill was beginning to disquiet her. "Excuse me, please—I wonder—where's the bathroom?"

"By the kitchen door," said Maximilian. "Near the end of the corridor we showed you."

"Coming, Nancy?" Jenny took her sister's arm and almost pulled her out of the room. The wearing off of the tablets was the least of her worries. In the corridor, she stopped and faced Nancy.

"All those questions! They're after something, Nancy! They thought we wouldn't notice!"

"Uncle Ken didn't notice."

"He wouldn't, he's had too much port. He's like that after sherry, too." Jenny sighed. "What can we do?"

Nancy shook her head. "There's only one thing we can do. When they make a move, we'll grab him and get him to run for it before they catch him. The Bentley's still outside the front—he can drive it, it can't be any different to our Black Bomber."

Jenny felt uneasy. "I don't think he's up to it—"

Suddenly the feeling became much worse, a shiver all the way up her

backbone, and in the same instant the door ahead opened. Out from the kitchen came the old cook, in her grey uniform and starched white apron. Jenny went silent at once. She wanted to close her eyes but did not dare to.

The cook stared at them. Her eyes were cold and unblinking. Her face bore patches of some skin disease which gave her an almost scaly appearance. She was very tall.

Nancy said, "We were looking for the bathroom."

Slowly the cook raised her hand, and indicated a narrow door set underneath the staircase.

"It is there."

"Oh, thank you." Nancy smiled brightly and led Jenny toward it. As the two of them went through the door Nancy whispered, "Jen, are you all right?"

"Not really. The feeling's coming back. Worse. Now I'm getting it from *her* as well!"

## 12

The Old Man sat slumped in his leather armchair, deep in thought. The girls had returned but were very quiet. Maximilian had been talking of werewolves and vampires, in fiction, and now he said casually, "Well, Ken, if you like the macabre, that cellar of ours would interest you."

"The cellar? You mentioned it just now." Harker controlled his speech well for someone who had consumed so much port. "What did you say you kept down there?"

"Stocks, a scold's bridle, and some man-traps our ancestors set in the grounds—"

Ancestors? The Old Man nearly grunted his protest. *He* had set those traps himself, in the days before the world began changing.

He could see that Maximilian was now quite determined to act. It was time. He spoke.

"Yes, you will find our cellar interesting. Maximilian! Will you go down, open the doors and arrange some light for our visitor?"

The Old Man had said *doors* in the plural deliberately. One door for the cellar itself, the other for the sea-chest. By now the chest had been filled. As everyone in Manor of Munington knew, any person found drowned off the cliffs would naturally have his lungs full of salt water.

Maximilian said, "I'll go down."

"We shall follow," said the Old Man. "First I shall find something to interest the girls. The library, perhaps."

The lower door to the library was off the stairs to the cellar.

As Maximilian went out, the Old Man motioned for the girls to get up. Their uncle was already standing. Slowly the Old Man nodded to them. "Yes, the library. I think, Mr. Harker, that you too would find some books of interest in our library. Come."

He led the three of them into the corridor. He saw that the girls were again pale; perhaps they had not liked the talk of man-traps. With a desire for haste, he took them through the stairs door, and down the first stone steps. Maximilian had put on the stairs lights already.

"This way, young ladies. You too, Mr. Harker. You are welcome to see the library."

He guided them across the underground landing and up the other steps, noticing the younger girl glance back nervously at the flight leading down to the cellar. She was the one he would speak to, then. He pressed on the secret catch, and the door swung away from him. In another moment, they had light, and were stepping into the library.

It was another long high-ceilinged room, always a little chilly due to its north aspect, but Digby had lit a small fire in the grate while their guests were eating, and the atmosphere was not unpleasant. Yes, the girls would prefer this to the cellar.

Most of his volumes were behind glass. Harker gave a slightly tipsy laugh. "Nice bookcases! A bit better than my old American ammunition boxes painted battleship grey, eh what?" He hiccuped. The Old Man saw the elder girl frowning at him behind his back.

On the table, under the light, the Old Man had left a book open.

"Ah, Mr. Harker, you see what I was reading earlier. A rare edition of a work by Doctor Polidori, annotated and illustrated. Sit down, please. This passage will be to your taste, I believe."

Harker slid somewhat abruptly into the chair which the Old Man held ready for him. His head bent over the volume.

Quietly, the Old Man turned to Jenny. "There is no need for him to hurry down to the cellar. If he is reading, he may stay here as long as he wishes. I will go down to Maximilian."

He moved away before she could do more than stare at him in puzzled fashion. Harker was reading, and the other girl was looking at an illustration with an expression of distaste.

The Old Man departed from the library, operating the secret catch again on his way out. He wondered how long his guests would take to examine their surroundings, and to discover that every door and window around them was now locked.

## 13

Jenny crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself tightly. It didn't help the feeling. Nancy looked worried.

This was as bad as last night.

"Mmph! A fascinating book, this. Still, better get down to Max, I suppose."

Jenny felt a shudder of horror at the thought. She was very tempted to follow Nancy's plan and try to get him out, perhaps climb through a window, flee away from Manor of Munington. And she was almost ill

with the strangeness inside her, boiling up like smoking ice, all white and inexplicable. She needed time to think.

Then she remembered what the Old Man had said as he left.

"Oh, Uncle Ken, you carry on reading. Old Mr. Munington said not to hurry, you read all you want to here."

"Well—"

"He won't mind, really."

And Jenny leaned over beside his shoulder, and put her finger to the printed words. In another moment, Uncle Ken was reading again.

Presently she became aware that his head had slipped further down. He was beginning to snore.

Carefully she moved away, feeling enormous relief that at least he would not attempt to go down to the cellar just yet. She turned back to Nancy, feeling the strangeness a little less for a second.

"He's asleep!"

"Too much port. Best thing, though. I really didn't like the sound of that cellar."

"If he sleeps long enough maybe they won't insist on him going down."

Then she realized how foolish that must sound, given their suspicions. Jenny thought hard. Things had gone wrong. It was her fault for falling in too readily with the Old Man's suggestions, instead of getting Uncle Ken to slip away at once. The Old Man was too persuasive. She and Nancy had better find an escape route now, before they were disturbed.

That was when she found they could not open the door. Or the other door. Or any of the windows.

Uncle Ken was asleep over the book and would not wake up no matter how hard they shook him. Every way out was locked, and something dreadful was being prepared for them in the cellar. They were all trapped. This was the worst moment of her life.

A worse moment was about to begin.

The strangeness within Jenny intensified suddenly. It became real pain. It seemed to twist like something cold and electric inside her and all around her, until it seemed to overwhelm her . . . as if she were sinking through seas of ice. . . .

She felt herself going down. She seemed to taste salt water.

"Jenny! Wake up! Oh please Jen, wake up!"

From darkness Jenny swam up into light, toward the anxious face of Nancy with her hair edged in the glow of the lamplight above. The strangeness was still there, but it was more bearable now.

Above her too was a huge lumpy face, solemn and high, the face of the Old Man of Munington.

"Is anything the matter, young lady?"

She remembered where she was, and the way she had felt when that

wave of strangeness came over her. She had felt nothing like that ever in her life before, but she could not admit it to that monstrous figure above her.

"It was nothing," said Jenny. "I get these headaches . . . I could do with an aspirin."

The Old Man nodded, reached for her and helped her up. She flinched, but fortunately he must have mistaken her reaction for ordinary shock, because he said almost gently, "We have no medication like that here, but perhaps your aunt will give you some when you go home."

Jenny gasped, "Home?"

The Old Man was already shaking her uncle where he lay slumped across book and table.

"Mr. Harker? Mr. Harker! No, he is deep in sleep. We shall have to carry him to the car."

"The car?" Jenny and Nancy echoed the words together. The Old Man must have meant it about them going home.

"Yes. It is time you two were in bed, I am sure, and time your uncle was too, I think. I shall bring Digby to help me carry him up."

This time, Jenny had enough wits left to ask, "Why not Mr. Wolf?"

"He has gone . . . gone for some fresh air, since he saw Mr. Harker was in no state to visit the cellar. He said it seemed a pleasant night for a walk." The Old Man of Munington went across to the other door. "I shall find Digby. Wait here." He was gone. As he went, the feeling of strangeness lessened.

Jenny remembered what she had felt before fainting, the sheer overwhelming power of it. She spun around, facing the door to the cellar stairs. It was open. No feeling came from down there, none at all. She looked back: Uncle Ken was still snoring. She could hear him.

"Nancy, stay with him. I want to look in the cellar."

"Jenny, no! Why?"

"Because there's no feeling! Don't stop me!"

She ran out, and clattered down the steps. No time for silence now. She had to see where that wave of strangeness had come from, now, before the Old Man could come back from arranging the car.

The lights were still on, the cellar door still open. Jenny rushed in. Around the shadowy margins she was vaguely aware of strange devices, of frameworks of timber and metal, of iron rods and leather-seeming straps, but after her first swift impressions she had eyes only for the large wooden chest in the center of the chamber.

The chest was huge, over six feet long. It had a heavy flat lid, now closed. Around it, the ancient stone flags of the floor were splashed with water.

Jenny went to the chest, reaching for the lid.

Nancy was beside her. "Jennifer, what are you doing?"

"Opening it! Give me a hand!"

"I shouldn't, but—just quickly, then."

Together they strained and pushed, and raised the lid a little way, until Jenny was able to see inside.

The thing under the water still wore clothes, but its half-seen face was like the face of some unknown animal. And the hand floating limply from a sleeve was merely a fold of webbed skin.

Jenny screamed.

The lid fell back with a heavy thud. A muffled swash of water sounded.

"Young ladies!"

The Old Man of Munington stood above them in the doorway. His presence seemed as immovable as the solid walls themselves.

With the strangeness a cold mist boiling around her, Jenny knew exactly what to do. She reached for two iron rods nearby, picked them up, and formed the sign of the cross.

She had read it in the books her uncle kept hidden.

The Old Man raised his hand toward her, then seemed to hesitate.

Jenny shook her head at him. "Don't come any nearer!" Nancy was still by the chest, frozen in shock.

"You will say nothing of this," said the huge figure in the doorway. "Your uncle is alive and I have saved him, though you do not realize it. There are some of us who believe that human civilization should progress with the minimum of interference, for the good of us all. So, young ladies, if you wish to ensure your uncle's safety you will go home and sleep, and remember only that there is no evil in Manor of Munington, not now. What you have seen must stay secret."

Jenny merely continued to hold up the cross. It was all she had.

The presence of the Old Man was bearing down upon her with almost hypnotic force.

"Secret. Your uncle's project is a military secret. You must say nothing."

Abruptly the Old Man turned in the doorway, and held out an arm to them.

"Come. We must carry your uncle to the car."

Afterward, Jenny still took the cross with her into the Bentley, and still held onto it as she sat beside Nancy and a slowly reviving Uncle Ken, all the way down through the country lanes right to the door of Coneygar Cottage.

On the doorstep she stood watching the car lights disappear back along the lane, and at last she let the iron rods fall. In her heart, she felt that they had really been of no use.

She and Nancy and Uncle Ken had returned alive from Manor of Munington only because it had suited the Old Man to *let* them live. She could only guess at why.

In the stories Jenny had read about forces of darkness and of light.

There were black witches who were evil. There were white witches who were not.

There were black vampires.

*Why not a white vampire?*

The following morning Digby brought the Bentley to a field gate below Longhouse, where the Old Man could look out over the roofs of Llandygoch and contemplate the timeless river Mwldan beyond.

"Will those girls talk, sir?"

"Not while their thoughts are inhibited by ideas from their foolish mystery tales. Humans are very suggestible creatures, when you have studied them for as long as I have. You noticed how I backed away before the smaller one's cross? They will not speak for fear of ridicule, and eventually the unpleasantness will have faded from their minds. Harker's life and work will be undisturbed. The balance will continue."

The Old Man shifted his bulk slowly, leaning more heavily on the gate.

"Thus the affair is ended. I regret that Maximilian became too troublesome, but it was inevitable, as we saw from the first. He had best move away suddenly, rather than become a Missing Person, you think?"

"I can arrange it either way, sir. It's funny how some of these youngsters who come to us learn the basics in no time, and some of them never do."

"Quite so, Digby. Maximilian would never have learned. Neither would he have appreciated that under the English system Harker's report will be pigeonholed for years, or certainly will not be acted upon until some other nation overcomes the refrigeration problem. But the end result will be the same, for this is not the only hydrogen bomb project in the world."

The Old Man straightened himself, very slowly.

"The knowledge will spread, Digby. Humanity will have a weapon capable of destroying every living thing on this planet."

"Well then, sir, you'd better go on keeping an eye on them."

"Indeed I had. Nothing is ever simple."

The Old Man of Munington left the gate, and returned to the passenger seat of the Bentley. After a moment, Digby too got in, and the Old Man gave directions to drive down toward Llandygoch, where he could buy a newspaper and see what *else* the human beings were learning to do. ●

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Two holiday weekends are on tap, with many con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folk-songs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons with a Filthy Pierre badge, making music.

## NOVEMBER 1993

12-14—**PhilCon**. For info, write: Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. Or phone: (215) 957-4004 (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: Philadelphia PA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Adam's Mark. Guests will include: Fred Saberhagen, David Cherry, Emma Bull, Ian Watson.

12-14—**SciCon**. (804) 591-2361. Holiday Inn Greenwich Rd., Virginia Beach VA. Tim Zahn, O. Sweet.

12-14—**OryCon**. (503) 283-0802. Red Lion Columbia River, Portland Oregon. Pratchett, Fanthorpe.

12-14—**ConStellation**. (205) 882-5922 or (205) 882-1006. Huntsville, AL. General SF/fantasy con.

12-14—**ArmadaCon**. (0752) 267-873. Astor Hotel, Plymouth UK. Cole, Jeffries, John-Jules, Bower.

12-14—**Super Collectibles Show**. (816) 261-8475. Dallas TX. Pre-1973 comics, Disney, toys, etc.

13-14—**PentaCon**. (219) 356-4209. Grand Wayne Center, Ft. Wayne IN. Gaming with a Medieval slant.

19-21—**SoonerCon**. (405) 350-7009. Central Plaza Hotel, Oklahoma City OK. Theme: Lewis Carroll.

19-21—**Leonard Nimoy Con**. (081) 842-3128. Nottingham UK. Mr. Nimoy is not expected to attend.

26-28—**LesCon**, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. (818) 767-9234. Burbank CA. Zelazny.

26-28—**ChambanaCon**, Box 2908, Springfield IL 62708. Champaign/Urbana IL. General SF/fantasy con.

26-28—**Darkover Council**, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. (202) 737-4609. Timonium MD.

26-28—**Visions**, Box 1202, Highland Park IL 60035. (708) 945-2946. O'Hare Hyatt, Chicago IL.

26-28—**ConTex**, Box 266996, Houston TX 77207. (713) 526-5625. General SF/fantasy. 400 expected.

26-28—**BeNeLuxCon**, % Vermaas, James Wattstraat 13, Amsterdam 1097 DJ, Netherlands. SF.

26-28—**Creation**, 530 Riverdale Dr., Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0960. Ramada 33rd, New York NY.

27-28—**MidOhioCon**. (419) 526-0438. Hyatt Regency Hotel, Columbus OH. Comics.

## DECEMBER 1993

2-5—**NordCon**, % Gdanski Klub Fantastyki, Box 76, Gdansk 37, 80-325, Poland. (48-58) 531-073. SF.

## SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian**, Box 2430, Winnipeg M8 R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427. WorldCon. \$85/C\$95 to 9/30/93.

## AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection**, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. Glasgow UK. WorldCon. US\$85 to 9/30/93.

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